

Preparing For Jesus

42. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.
(Matthew 24:42-44. NRSV)

16. John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."
(Luke 3:16-17. NRSV)

Message 8

Doubting Jesus

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Matthew 11:2-6

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Introduction:

Alright – everyone take a deep breath and let it out. One more time, ok. You need your brains turned on, you need your mind fully oxygenated and you need your body properly caffeinated because we are about to dive in to one of the most profound passages in the New Testament. This is our last Sunday in the Preparing For Jesus series and it takes us into the deepest place of the John the Baptist narrative. Open your Bibles to Matthew 11:2-6.

2. And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples 3. and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" 4. Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: 5. "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6. "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." (Matthew 11:2-6. NKJV)

We need some help to get into this passage because none of us are first century Jewish Rabbis and in this story we are eavesdropping on a conversation between the two most famous Rabbis in first century Israel and frankly, what we are hearing is way over our heads. The first thing we need to understand is that Rabbis are weird. Settle under that

truth. Rabbis spoke to each other and they spoke to their students in code. Jewish people in general love code and all you have to do is read the Psalms in Hebrew to realise that word games and alphanumeric code are very close to the heart of Jewish authors. One of the very common codes that Rabbis used with their students is called *remez*. I don't want to get overly technical but the heart of *remez* is Scripture memorisation. A Rabbi would quote a passage to his student and ask a question, but the student was expected to recognise the quotation and notice what was added or deleted. What was added or deleted was the real question and the answer had to reflect that. Or sometimes the way it worked was that the Rabbi would ask a question using one verse, say Psalm 2:3, but he expected the student to understand that the real question was from the previous verse and so the student would answer with a verse but he really meant the verse after that and back and forth it went. This method allowed the Rabbi to test the Scripture knowledge of his students and also safeguard the mysteries of God from the unprepared or sloppy. This is a thing about Judaism we don't get. We don't get the immense respect they had for the Word of God. A good Rabbi, it is said, could pierce an old scroll; the Rabbis destroyed a scroll as soon as it started showing signs of wear as a gesture of respect; a good Rabbi could pierce an old scroll with a dagger and tell you every verse in the Bible the dagger passed through as it ripped from layer to layer. They had the first five books of the Bible memorised word for word by age 12. This was a culture where Torah was deeply honoured and revered. The deeper mysteries of God's Word had to be safeguarded from the discourse of ignorant or careless men. For example, Jewish men were forbidden to read the Scroll of Ezekiel until they were 30 years old. It was considered too complicated and too intricate for young men who were likely to misinterpret it and misapply it. So the technique of *remez* reflects these concerns.

Let me provide a rather silly modern day example of how this might work. Suppose you came to me and said: 'Pastor, I need help with my prayer life, God doesn't seem to be listening to me. What should I do?' And I answered this way: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And give us this day our daily bread. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.' What did I leave out? 'Forgive us our trespasses as

we forgive those who trespass against us.’ Now assuming that I was using *remez* and not just demonstrating poor memory, what might I be saying to my young disciple? I might be saying: ‘God is not hearing your prayer because you have unconfessed sin in your life and you are harbouring bitterness towards other believers’. But I would be saying it in a way that forced him into the Word of God. That is the beauty of *remez* and that is the key to understanding this passage. Very quickly then, what is Jesus doing through this coded dialogue with John the Baptist?

John is in prison, he is getting reports through his disciples about the activity of Jesus and he sends a message: ‘Are you the Coming One, the Expected One, the Messiah, or should we expect another?’ John is having doubts. The ministry of Jesus was not lining up with John’s understanding of the prophecies and it was not lining up with the words God had given him that prepared the Way for the Coming King. John had proclaimed:

10. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:10-12. NRSV)

John’s message, given to him by GOD ALMIGHTY, in the Spirit and Power of Elijah was: ‘REPENT!!!! REPENT your brood of vipers! The ax is lying at the root of the tree! I see the Coming King and his Kingdom is at hand! He will throw down fire upon the earth, he will separate wheat from chaff and every life that does not show the fruit of true faith will be cast into the fires of hell!!!!!!!’ And then out comes Jesus, preaching to the poor and healing the sick and extending grace to the prostitutes and tootling about Israel speaking about talents and virgins, making wine for weddings and having tea with tax collectors and John just about lost his mind. He started loosing his very long hair and gnashing his very locust stained teeth. Who is this guy? Let’s get this party started! I’m in jail Jesus! The fellow who brings me my slop every day may soon come for my head, its time to kick the tires and light the fires you know what I’m saying? So he sends his disciples with a very clear message: Are you the one? And Jesus replies with *remez*. ‘This is not the time for CODES master! This is not time for Sword Drill, I may be dead

before I figure out your cute little riddle Jesus, tell me what's going on!' What is going on? Why does Jesus answer the greatest prophet born of women with a Rabbinical riddle? Let's look and see:

1. Jesus is placing John in the posture of a student.

It must have been very humbling for John when his disciples arrived back with a riddle instead of an answer. 'I am the Preparatory Prophet! I go forth in the Spirit and Power of Elijah! Did you forget to remind Jesus about the manner of my going forth?' 'No Rabbi, we reminded him of your going forthness, but this is what he said.' 'Well I never!' What does this remind you of? It reminds me a little bit of the time Peter pulled even with Jesus and began to give him some well meaning advice. Normally students followed the Rabbi and walked behind him at a respectful distance but in one story Peter – the future head of the church, pulled even with Jesus as is recorded in Matthew 16:

22. And **Peter took him aside** and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23. But he turned and said to Peter, "**Get behind me**, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matthew 16:22-23. NRSV)

Every time I read that story I get goosebumps. I make a note to self: 'Please do not ever correct Jesus you dumb bag of hammers!' We forget sometimes that Jesus is God. We get fooled by his kindness. We say ridiculous things like: 'But Jesus is so kind, not at all like the severe God of the Old Testament.' Its the same God! God in the flesh! Do you mean to imply that God the Father, Yahweh Elohim is incapable of kindness? Yahweh is kind. But he is also severe:

22. **Note then the kindness and the severity of God:** severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. (Romans 11:22. NRSV)

Jesus of course could be kind and he usually was, but if you ever acted arrogantly towards him or forgot for a moment that he was the Master and you were the disciple then he put you back in your place with a thump. How very like God. Job in the Old Testament, with the help of some well meaning friends tried to pull even with God and

debate the matter of how suffering could be reconciled with the Sovereignty of God. God did not take kindly to this presumption and said:

7. "Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me. 8. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? 9. Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? 10. "Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor. 11. Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on all who are proud, and abase them. 12. Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand. 13. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below. 14. Then I will also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you victory. (Job 40:7-14. NRSV)

Modern translation: 'Shut up boy and get thee behind me. Back in line and listen while the Master speaks.' Now let's slow down here for a second and work through this because I don't want to imply that doubts are not permitted. We are allowed to have doubts but there is a continuum to doubt. There is a form of doubt which is rooted in humility and informed by the bigness of God. That is the type of doubt which says things like:

3. When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained, 4. What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? (Psalm 8:3-4. NKJV)

"Oh Lord, you are so majestic and powerful, your works and ways are so wonderful and glorious! I can't even begin to understand how I fit into this Lord, but if you call me I will obey!" That is the humble place of the awestruck student. That's a good place. You can have questions in that place, many people asked Jesus questions and he answered them very kindly and very patiently. Questions and doubts are fine when they are asked from the place of humility. When they question God's identity, control or wisdom they are not well received. Jesus begins the dialogue with John exactly as he began it with Job, by placing the questioner into the seat of the student.

2. Jesus is assuring John that God's promises are in motion.

Remember I told you that one of the methods of *remez* was to quote one verse while really intending to highlight the previous verse? Jesus answers the question of John by

quoting from two Old Testament prophecies about the Coming One that John would have had memorised. The first is from Isaiah 35. I'm going to read it from the LXX:

5. Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear. 6. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of stammerers shall speak plainly; for water has burst forth in the desert, and a channel of water in a thirsty land. (Isaiah 35:5-6. LXX)

You can see quite clearly that the bulk of Jesus' answer to John is taken out of this text; specifically verses 5 and 6. But look at what Jesus was also saying, the verse before this quote, which from long years of training would have leapt immediately into John's mind says this:

Comfort one another, **ye fainthearted**; be strong, **fear not**; behold **our God renders judgment**, and he will render it; he will come and save us. (Isaiah 35:4. LXX)

Jesus is saying to his beloved disciple and first called Apostle: 'Don't be afraid John. I am in control. The judgement you foresaw was not an illusion or a deception. It is real. It has come in me. I have brought salvation and judgement, just wait and you will see'. You catch a glimpse of Jesus' kindness here. We've already been shocked a little by his severity but the two always seem to go hand in hand. He comforts his disciple and rebukes his fear in code. The disciples who carried the message would not have even realised that they carried a rebuke. Jesus did not shame John even in rebuking him.

3. Jesus is reminding John that God owns the plan.

Not only does *remez* involve the verse before and after it hinges upon additions and deletions. If you compare these passages side by side you see direct correlations.

Matthew 11

the blind receive sight...

the lame walk...

Isaiah 35

the eyes of the blind shall be opened...

the lame man leaps as a hart...

the deaf shall hear...

the tongue of stammerers shall speak...

This one needs a little explaining. In Greek the word for deaf is the same as the word for dumb. It is the word κωφον and is translated 8 times in the New Testament as dumb, meaning unable to speak and 5 times as deaf meaning unable to hear. So this is a perfect correlation, Jesus is saying that right in line with Isaiah 35 people who cannot speak or hear will be healed.

So right away as these words come out John is tracking with the passage; he had Isaiah 35 memorised word for word. And so he noticed something. Jesus added two things that were not in the original prophecy. John understood immediately that this was the message:

- i. *the lepers are cleansed...*
- ii. *the dead are raised...*

Jesus says to John: ‘You are only confused because my mission is larger than you were told. I have come to do all that you know about and a few things you don’t. I have come to restore lepers John.’ In the Bible lepers were people who were cut off from the people of God and the worship of God because of uncleanness. Jesus says to John in Rabbi code: ‘I have come to add in a people long cut off. I have come to broaden out the worship of my Father, John. Can you handle that my priestly Jewish friend?’ He also adds the phrase: the dead are raised. In Rabbi code Jesus says: ‘I have also come to make dead men live John. Many are the men, dead in their sins that you would quickly consign to the fires of hell. I’m taking a longer term look at things John. I’m effecting a pause in the purpose of God that you were not told about. I am a kind God and a patient God and I am offering life to those born into death. Can you handle that John? Prophet of the desert? Seeker of the kingdom? Can you wait for my kindness to have its day? I own the plan John and I will craft it in accordance with my nature. Note then the kindness and severity of your Lord, John.’

4. Jesus is cautioning John to keep his suffering in perspective.

After quoting and altering Isaiah 35 Jesus throws in one line from the beginning of another well known prophecy about Messiah. We also know this one well:

the poor have the gospel preached to them... (Matthew 11:5. NKJV)

This is the opening phrase from Isaiah 61 which goes on to say:

1. "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2. to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn (Isaiah 61:1-2. NRSV)

Now put yourselves in John's shoes as he heard this message through the lips of his disciples. Where was he? In prison. His head was literally on the chopping block and he would soon be executed by King Herod Antipas. As the words of this prophecy start to roll off the tongues of his messengers John must have begun dancing foot to foot. 'Oh yes Lord! I am prepared to receive!! Bring me the good news of my deliverance Lord!' But they don't get there. They stop at line 1. 'I'm preaching the good news to the poor John.' And John must have grabbed the messengers by their cloaks and demanded: 'Where is the rest of the message?! What else did the Master say, do not withhold a word if you love me at all. There was more wasn't there? He must have said more.' Looking down at the floor as they guessed what was missing they answered: 'No Rabbi, there was no more.' And John slumped to the floor of the dungeon of Machaerus, the worst and lowliest prison in Palestine and he began to cry out: 'Why Lord? Why?' Jesus had sent no word about release for the captives. No word about prisoners being set free. John would meet his fate at the hands of Herod's executioner. Good news for the poor was not good news for John.

The coming of Jesus is kind of a good news bad news story isn't it? On the one hand, John, this is wonderful news! Many people previously outside of the people of God are going to be grafted in! Praise the Lord, hallelujah! On the other hand John, your head is

going to be cut off and served to a silly girl on a silver plate. That's the bad news. But in the long run, its really not that bad. Jesus taught time and again:

28. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28. NRSV)

'Don't worry John. Herod will take your head but your soul belongs to me. You will have a place of honour in my kingdom, of that you can be sure.' The coming of Jesus is always a good news bad news story and the church loses sight of that at her peril. In the last 100 years of so there has been a lot of fear based, delusional theology that the church needs to finish casting off. The whole 'rapture of the church before the day of the Lord so that we don't have to suffer' nonsense is a great example. We refuse to believe that the coming of the Lord could be anything other than happy, happy joy joy. So we invented an addition to the story, added very late. Luther didn't know of it, nor Calvin, nor Peter nor Paul but thank God for Scoffield and Darby who 100 years ago thought of a way for us to avoid suffering as a church. We'll go to heaven and have supper while two angelic beings finish the task of world evangelism while the sinners go to hell in a hand basket. Brilliant idea! But quite obviously fear based and delusional. If we had nothing to fear then I doubt Jesus would have left us with the words:

7. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:7. NRSV)

11. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death. (Revelation 2:11. NRSV)

17. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. (Revelation 2:17. NRSV)

26. To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations 27. to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered-- 28. even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. 29. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. (Revelation 2:26. NRSV)

5. If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. 6. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. (Revelation 3:5-6. NRSV)

11. I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you

the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. (Revelation 3:11-13. NRSV)

21. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." (Revelation 3:21-22. NRSV)

These are the last words of a King who expected his servants to be engaged in battle before his return. These are fighting words. This is a call for courage in the face of a furious onslaught. If he was going to extract us from the fight before all of this took place then these words become unnecessary. If he is going to leave us in the thick of it, to have our finest hour in the heat of battle, to write our final testimony in the blood of the martyrs then these words make perfect sense. Let he who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

John sat in his dungeon cell all alone with the Spirit of God. His messengers had left, their visitors' pass long expired. He sat in the dark and he wrestled with the Spirit. 'Can you still worship me and trust me even if my salvation is not your deliverance? Can you still serve me John? Even if all I require of you is your death?' We don't know how John answered those questions, we are simply not told. Some things are too holy to share, even for the encouragement of the brethren. A short while later a man sent from Herod arrived at John's cell without announcement. His servants roughly bound John and bent him forward at the waist placing his head upon a block of wood. The man raised an ax above his head and brought it swiftly down upon John's neck. No time for a speech, a prayer or even last words. The greatest man born of a woman died without witness, without fanfare and without warning. His head was delivered still warm to a silly dancing girl who had caught the king's fancy and tricked him into a ridiculous gesture. John had once insulted her mother and his head was the payment she wanted in return for the pleasure of the king. John's life was spent to buy favours from a stripper. Such was the end of the preparatory prophet. Merry Christmas eh?

Transition:

So what do we take from this story as we use the lens of the first coming to be ever ready for the next? Really quick:

i. We need to sit comfortably in the seat of the student.

Let me promise you that as the events associated with the Day of Wrath begin to come upon us many of us in the Christian world are going to be beset with doubts. ‘What happened to my Rapture? I was supposed to be eating steak with Jesus while all you sinners fell under the wrath of God! What’s going on? Is God really in control?’ Jesus predicted that alongside of the greatest harvest in the history of the church, the Day of Wrath would also involve the greatest season of apostasy, doubt and falling away:

10. Then **many will fall away**, and they will betray one another and hate one another. 11. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. 13. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:10-14. NRSV)

Revival and apostasy in the same, last chapter of the story. That’s an odd end but it will come. Confusion becomes doubt when we get up from the seat of the student and begin to express irritation with the plan of God. ‘I want my Rapture! I did not sign up for suffering or for sacrifice! I would like a meeting with Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild and he better be wearing swaddling clothes and lying in a manger!’ Not a good approach. Sit patiently and humbly and expect to be a little confused as the great plan of God unfolds.

ii. We need to sit long under the ministry of the Word.

The fact that John was even able to have this dialogue with Jesus is a rebuke to modern readers. We could read the response of Jesus a thousand times and not realise what is being said. All we would have to do is look in the margin of our Bibles or the text notes or maybe at worst a commentary to be told that Jesus is quoting two Old Testament prophecies but we don’t have time for that. We are the Daily Bread Devotional Generation, if God can’t say it in one verse then we are not listening. One verse

Christians are going to have a real hard go in the coming season. Sit longer under the Word of God. You may have noticed that our sermon length has been creeping up. When I came here I was told to preach for 25 minutes. My first sermon was 30 minutes. They've been going up 5 minutes every year since then and I haven't been fired yet so who knows where this could go. Daily Bread Christianity is how we got into this mess and we aren't out of it yet.

iii. We need to sit quietly in the presence of the Spirit.

The church needs some dungeon time. I tell you if we do another Christmas like the one we're doing now I think God is going to give us some dungeon time. We have been moving so fast and spending so much time on distractions and silliness that I don't know whether we've heard word one from the Holy Spirit in a month. That's not good enough. We can sit quietly or we can be shut down, the choice is ours. God has something to say and if he can't get our attention he might knock us out cold.

iv. We need to sit steadfastly in the shadow of the cross.

John's end is just as important for the church to reflect on as his beginning. Some of us secretly delight in the return to the church of the true Gospel: 'REPENT FOR THE AX IS LYING AT THE ROOT OF THE TREE!!!!' is a message that actually kind of excites some of us. Let's get this party started, bring it on! We like the start of John's story. Well consider the end. The ax was lying at the root of the tree and it was used to cut John's head from his body. The Bible says this about our great evangelistic harvest that is coming soon:

7. When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, 8. and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. (Revelation 11:7-8. NRSV)

Those who participate in the end times harvest will do it with their wills filled out and filed and their final affairs in order. We used to understand this. In the 19th century British missionaries travelling to Africa to spread the Gospel took their coffins with them

when they boarded the ships in London. They understood that when you go out to harvest you go out to bleed and then to die. Jesus said:

"Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. 21. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. (John 15:20-21. NRSV)

‘Whatever they did to me they will do to you before this is all over’ Jesus said. When they have finished their testimony their dead body will lie in the street of that great city which is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt where also their Lord was crucified. Sorry to burst your bubble friend, but our mission does not end in Rapture, it ends in death. If you can't see the cross on the road you are travelling, you are not on the narrow way. The longer I walk this road the more the shadow and prospect of the cross dominates my view. I know in my heart that it will grow and grow until I can see no other. Even so, come Lord Jesus. And all God's people said, Amen.