

The Leprosy Mission - Letting the Light In Devotionals

**Week 6 – Expectations and Hope**

Matthew 11:2-6

A few years ago, I went to a performance of the musical Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat. As the show was about to start, it was announced that the performer was unwell and that his voice had been affected but that he would still be performing. As the show began, it was clear that this had not been a wise decision. Poor Joseph struggled to hit the notes and his rendition of Close Every Door was so excruciating that some in the audience laughed. The title Close Every Door was apt for how I felt; I wanted to leave and shut the door behind me. My expectations had come crashing down.

In Matthew chapter 11, we see that John the Baptist’s expectations about the Messiah have failed to materialise. Matthew has already recorded that Jesus has stilled a storm, healed a paralysed man and restored a girl to life. John the Baptist has been in prison since early on in Jesus’ ministry and he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” It is a shocking question. John seems to doubt that Jesus is the Messiah at all.

John had seen his ministry as calling people to repent, to be ready for the coming of the Messiah, calling out ‘The kingdom of God is near’. The kingdom was coming near because Jesus’ ministry was beginning. Jesus, the Messiah, was starting to usher in God’s just rule on earth, the beginning of a perfect kingdom that will be complete when God renews his creation. At that point, John was convinced Jesus was the Messiah. He spoke of Jesus as “one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 3:11). John had understood his role within God’s plan, that he was passing on the baton to the Messiah.

Why then does John now doubt? It may be that John’s circumstances of facing hardship in prison are causing him to doubt what he used to be so certain of. More than that, it seems Jesus has not lived up to John’s expectations of what the Messiah would be like. In Matthew Chapter 3, John spoke of the Messiah gathering the wheat and burning the chaff. It is a picture of judgment against evil that John may have hoped the Messiah would bring immediately. With Jesus, this fierce judgment had not been apparent. Instead, Jesus’ ministry was characterised by teaching and miracles for the helpless and weak, those whom society wrote off as unimportant. The ministry of the Messiah was perhaps more ‘low-key’ than John had hoped.

Jesus’ response to John’s doubt is not to say “Come on cousin, of course I’m the Messiah! You know me!” Instead, he tells John’s disciples to report back to John what they see Jesus doing: *“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”* (11:5) Jesus points John’s disciples to evidence that he is fulfilling Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah about the Messiah, who will bring about a Kingdom where there is no more disease, despair, or death.

John had to be open to God’s unfolding plan even though it did not fit his expectations. For many of us, our expectations for this year will be unfulfilled. We have had to cancel holiday arrangements and weddings. We have had the hope of our future with a loved one snatched away or been unable to hold the funeral that they would have wanted. Even if our expectations haven’t come to pass and the last few weeks have been incredibly painful, we can remain people of hope. We can have total confidence that we look ahead to an eternal future where there is no more disease, despair, or death. The Messiah has come and Jesus will come again to gather God’s people, those living and those who have fallen asleep in Him, to God’s perfect new creation.

Jesus commanded his disciples to cleanse those affected by leprosy. I believe that when a person is cured of leprosy today, we have the privilege of partnering with God to bring hope as his kingdom continues to unfold. One person who has experienced this hope is Nagammal, who lives in the Tamil Nadu region of India. Here is a retelling of her story:

*“I was 18 years old when I first noticed patches on my face but then things got worse. My hands and feet became deformed. The doctors told me it was leprosy. At this time I frequently cooked for my elderly mother. Sometimes I would burn myself and not even realise because I was losing sensation in my hands. Then my ulcers got worse. My toes and fingers needed to be amputated due to infection. I was no longer able to do anything for myself. Then one day there was so much rain, more than I had ever seen in my life. I waited for someone to come and rescue me from the goat’s shed where I was staying. As I was waiting my ulcers became infected by the dirty floodwaters. For 4 days and 4 nights, no-one came to help me. I felt so alone. A few days after the flood struck, an educated man from another village approached me as I was seeking refuge from the water. I couldn’t remember the last time someone was happy to see me. The man told me he was from The Leprosy Mission. He looked at my ulcers and bandaged my wounds. It was as if Jesus himself had come to visit me. After the flood, they took me to the Leprosy Mission Hospital. Every day they cared for me, feeding me and helping me wash. They performed surgery to my arm. After rehabilitation, I could eat, cook and even clean for myself. Now I am fully independent. I feel like I am a part of society now, that I am just like everyone else. There used to be nights when I could not bear the thought of living for another day. But now my life is transforming, I have become a person of hope.”*

The resolution of Nagammal’s story would not have happened if it were not for Jesus, who remains at the centre of any work that brings about his kingdom on earth. Indeed, The Leprosy Mission itself exists only to finish what Jesus started by bringing healing and hope to people affected by leprosy. That work goes on today, even in the darkness of this pandemic. As the virus spreads, developing countries where we work will be hit hard, and people affected by leprosy are vulnerable. And yet, we are so grateful that a gift of only £24 is enough to bring the cure for leprosy to someone who needs it, someone like Nagammal, even in the midst of this crisis.

Let us close with these wonderful words about God’s new creation from Revelation 21:

*“I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.**“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”*

*Written by Chris Stratta*

***Matthew 11:1-6***

*After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.*

***2****When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples****3****to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”*

***4****Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see:****5****The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.****6****Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”*

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