

*Lord Jesus Christ, drive the darkness from our hearts, and fill us with your light. Amen.*

Don't you hate it when your expectations are not met? When **what you see is what you get**?

You finally watch the movie that got all the hype and it's a CGI borefest. You finally go to the restaurant with the rave reviews, and your entrée tastes like it was cooked in a microwave and it gives you food poisoning. You finally unwrap what's under the tree, hoping for that one thing you've wanted all year, but your parents decided on an educational Christmas rather than a fun Christmas.

It can be disappointing when **what you see is what you get**. But what if it's your Christianity that doesn't seem to pay off – is that disappointing, or something more serious? When your life does not look like you think it should, like the life of a child of the LORD God Almighty.

All during Advent you've heard these beautiful Readings from Isaiah that paint a picture of Messiah's kingdom: the highest of mountains that everyone will stream to (Isaiah 2:1-5); peace so absolute that wolf and lamb and infant and cobra live without harm (Isaiah 11:1-10); splendor so glorious that even the parched wilderness blooms (Isaiah 35:1-10).

But does that describe your life? Is that what you see? Or do the bills pile up? Does your body break down? Does evil seem to be on a relentless winning streak? **Is what you see what you get**? Because often what you see looks very ugly, very backwards, very unfair.

Just look at John the Baptizer. His mission was to prepare the way for Messiah. So he warned the people: "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:10). But when John took that message to King Herod and told Herod to repent for stealing his brother's wife, Herod put John in prison (Matthew 14:3-4).

So how you would react if you saw what John saw? The edge of God's ax was not at Herod's roots, the sword of Herod's executioner was at John's neck. The good tree was being fed to the flames.

It looked very ugly, very backwards, very unfair. He must have thought: "When I pointed to Jesus as the One who is to come (John 1:29-30), did I point to the wrong guy? If he is who I thought he was, why do things look like this?"

Now, you are not in that dungeon with John, but I bet that its contours feel very familiar. The same temptation that struck him, strikes you and me. The centuries change, but the doubt stays the same.

Because you do your best. You come to church with the family all the time, but you still fight. You stand up for what is right, and no one appreciates it. You generously support the ministry of the gospel, but when your car breaks down or your son needs a trip to the ER, you're strapped for cash. You look around and see people who are so much happier and healthier and wealthier and stronger, and you wonder, "What am I doing wrong?"

Life looks ugly and backwards and unfair. **Is what you see what you get**? Then what's the point? And don't you just want to demand that God change what you see?

But that was not what John did. From prison he sent a delegation to Jesus with a message. But he didn't say, "Jesus, I did exactly what you told me to, it put me in prison, when are you going to get me out?" No, he just asked: **"Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (11:3).**

John was the last and greatest prophet to point people ahead to the coming Savior. But, unlike all the Old Testament prophets before him, John had a front row seat for Messiah's arrival. Imagine how badly he wanted to see Jesus fulfill everything that had been promised, to watch Messiah come with vengeance and divine retribution to save his people (Isaiah 35:4).

But when Jesus arrived, what John saw was ugly, backwards, and unfair. He was being punished for doing the right thing, and evil King Herod was doing great. That was the challenge of what John saw. That is the challenge of what we see (Psalm 73).

So listen to Jesus' answer: **"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> 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" (11:4-5).** Jesus was not simply bragging about his accomplishments or rattling off his resume. Everything he said was something that the Messiah was supposed to do (Isaiah 35:5-6; 42:18; 61:1).

Jesus was telling John, "You might not live to see the vengeance and the divine retribution, but remember everything else that was promised about the Savior, remember these things that are already happening, that people are seeing with their own eyes."

Then Jesus said: **"Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (11:6).** That is, blessed are those who do not lose their faith because the Messiah does not look like they expected him to.

That was true for John, and it is also true for you. Following Jesus comes with days that seem so ugly, so backwards, so unfair, but Jesus says to you: "Do not stumble over what you cannot understand about me. Instead, cling to what you do know about me."

In other words, **what you see is what you get**. You just need to change your perspective; take in the whole picture. And in this, you have a huge advantage over John the Baptizer.

John was not an ear-scratching preacher who said what people wanted to hear and was focused on his own personal comfort. He was more than a prophet of God; he was Messiah's forerunner (11:7-10).

But even so, John could not see the full picture about Jesus. He had to cling to what others were seeing, to the message his disciples carried back to that prison. So do you. But what you can see, the message that others have carried to you, would have made John crazy jealous.

That's why Jesus said: **"Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (11:11).**

He's talking about you! Not long after this incident, John the Baptizer had his head cut off (Matthew 14:6-11). He did not live to see Jesus fulfill all the messianic promises.

Not you though. You have a New Testament perspective on Jesus, and that makes you greater than John. You can see the whole truth about Messiah: that he came first in weakness and humility to die for our sins (Philippians 2:5-8) and that he will come a second time with vengeance and divine retribution on the Last Day (Philippians 2:9-11).

But like John, you can also find yourself in your own personal prison of darkness. There is plenty in life that makes you wonder, **"Is what you see what you get?"**

So think about it like this. Your life is a beautiful, gigantic tapestry that the Messiah has made, where every last detail contributes to the overall picture of you with him in heaven forever (Romans 8:28-39). But day to day, you only see part of this picture, what's right in front of you, and not the entire thing. So what you see is not what you get, unless you change your perspective and look at the whole thing, to see how everything fits together, to see God's ultimate plan.

How do you do that? Well, you don't do anything. Instead Jesus does for you exactly what he did for John. But the Bible is the delegation that Jesus has sent to you (John 20:31).

In this book, you have a collection of eyewitness testimony of Jesus fulfilling all the promises about Messiah: born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:4) in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2); preached in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-2); rejected (Isaiah 53:3) and hated (Psalm 69:4) by most; betrayed by a friend (Psalm 41:9); his clothes gambled for (Psalm 22:18); his hands pierced (Psalm 22:16) for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:8); buried with the rich (Isaiah 53:9); rose from the dead (Psalm 16:10) – just as promised.

And it is in this same book that God promises to bless you and keep you (Numbers 6:24), to work all things in this life for your good (Romans 8:28), to rescue you from every evil attack and bring you safely to his heavenly kingdom (2 Timothy 4:18), because you are – in spite of what you see – a child of the LORD God Almighty (Galatians 3:26).

There will always be a lot about what you see that you will not now understand. You cling to what others say they have seen. That is how Jesus drove the darkness from John's heart. That's how Jesus' drives the darkness from your heart too. Because **what you see is what you get** (2 Corinthians 1:20). Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.