Fear Not – Part 2

# When You’re Struggling with Unmet Expectations

## (John 16:33)

Today we are in week number two of our message series Fear Not and I believe today’s message is going to be very helpful for those of you who either have or are struggling with unmet expectations. In fact, some of you may have had this experience, you may have had the impression that when you put your trust in Jesus Christ that suddenly, supernaturally, all of your troubles would all disappear. However, it wasn’t long before you began struggling with unmet expectations, because the truth is that Jesus warned his followers beforehand, saying,

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

And so, we can count on it, troubles will surely come, but I’m believing that God is going to use this message to build your faith, helping you to persevere and overcome. My prayer is that God would meet with you in his word today and use it to challenge you, to change you, to speak to you, and to equip you to face life without false expectations.

Would you turn in your Bibles with me to Matthew’s gospel at chapter 11? The context of this passage is that John the Baptist who had lived in the wilderness actively calling people to repentance was now confined in prison because he refused to be swayed by the winds of culture. He had been an outdoorsman all of his life, but was now confined, silenced in isolation, because he had spoken up against the adulterous marriage of King Herod to Herodias, his brother’s wife. And so, John was a man of great conviction and courage who refused to water down his message and cater to the crowd even if it cost him his life.

In verse two of Matthew chapter 11, John is alone and struggling with faith in prison, and so “When he heard what Christ was doing,” the Bible says,

“He sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:2-3).

In other words, John the Baptist was sitting in prison and he was confused, he was struggling not only with the fear of what might happen to him, but he was struggling with unmet expectations of the Messiah Jesus Christ. You see, he had been given divine revelation about Jesus, but like most of the people he was expecting a Messiah who would come and overthrow the Roman empire. And so, when John heard about what Jesus was doing it caused him to question who he was, because Jesus didn’t come riding on a white stallion, brandishing a sword, but instead he came healing the sick, casting out demons, and preaching a message of love.

Our Savior Jesus Christ came in a demonstration of power, but it wasn’t the kind of power that the people were expecting. And so, when Jesus was questioned, he replied to John’s disciples,

“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:4-5).

Now certainly John would have recognized the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah. He spoke of the coming Messiah saying, “In that day the deaf will hear… out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. Once more the humble will rejoice in the Lord…” (Isaiah 29:18-19). And so, the Messiah, the Christ came, the deaf hear, the blind receive their sight, the good news is preached to the poor, the humble rejoice in the Lord, but the Kingdom didn’t come the way that John was expecting it to come. And now he’s locked up in prison, he’s in isolation wrestling with his thoughts, struggling with fear and doubts because of his unmet expectations, because things just didn’t work out the way he expected them to.

I wonder if there are any of you today who can relate to John? Any of you who thought everything was going to work out just the way that you hoped? You thought things were going to turn out one way, but they didn’t turn out that way at all? Maybe it was in your education or your career, your marriage or your finances, you thought this or that was going to happen, but it doesn’t happen the way that you wanted it to. Maybe you prayed and you thought God was going to do exactly what you asked, but he doesn’t come through the way you wanted him to come through? Maybe you’ve experienced something like that in your faith? What do you do then, how do you handle unmet expectations?

Well, here’s what I want you to understand; God may not always live up to your expectations, but he always lives up to his Word. And so, if he said, “I will be with you,” he’ll be with you. If he said, “I’ll never leave you,” he’ll never leave you. And if he said, “I’ll never forsake you,” he’ll never forsake you (Joshua 1:5). But the truth is, even though that is good to preach, it’s a little harder to live that out. It’s hard to walk in faith when you feel like God didn’t come through for you, when you feel all alone, feeling like he’s left you.

And there are some of you who grew up in church like I did, and maybe your experience was like mine, but for me church was really predictable. And what I mean is that church was an hour, it was always an hour, and so you would come in and sit down. Then you would stand up, sit down, stand up, sit down, sing a song and go home. And yet, even as predictable as church was, when I went home there was always the unmet expectation, the feeling that there had to be something more. Just like those times when you’ve prayed, and you thought God was going to do this or God was going to do that, and you were really believing, but he didn’t. And it creates this little bit of doubt in your mind, you begin to wonder if you’re on your own, if it’s up to you, and so you begin to doubt God.

Well, if you’ve ever doubted God, I want to assure you that you are in good company. In fact, all through the Bible you’ll find character after character that has struggled with doubt. Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, over and over and over again we find them doubting and deciding to take things in their own hands. Even Job, whom the Lord said,

“There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8).

We often talk about the faith of Job, how he said, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (Job 13:15). But no one preaches on chapter 14, nobody teaches about how Job felt in verse 18 when he told God,

"As a mountain erodes and crumbles, as a rock is moved from its place, as water wears away stones, and torrents wash away the soil, so you destroy man's hope” (Job 14:18-19).

And suddenly we see a different side of Job, someone that we can relate to, someone who knew what it was like to struggle with unmet expectations.

Or then, there is Jeremiah, the great prophet of God who felt completely alone, neglected, and forgotten. He knew what it was like to struggle with doubt, he even wrote a whole book of sorrows, called Lamentations. Even though Jeremiah heard from God and his word burned like a fire in his bones, much of his life was consumed with struggling with unmet expectations. He would cry out to God asking,

“Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?” (Jeremiah 15:18).

In other words, he questions God’s faithfulness, he says, “God shuts out my prayer” (Lamentations 3:8). But then in the next breath he says,

“I called on your name, O Lord… You came near when I called you,

and you said, "Do not fear" (Lamentations 3:55,57).

And so, going back to Matthew’s gospel, you really can’t get much more proof than John the Baptist had that Jesus was who he said he was. I mean, when Jesus was baptized, John was right there, he had a front row seat, and when Jesus came up “out of the water” the Bible says,

“At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17).

John saw and heard these things, and so how do you get to that place where you’ve experienced the presence of God, where you’ve seen God do great things, and suddenly you’re doubting that he is who he says he is? How do you move from such profound revelation, with the heavens opening, and the Spirit of God descending, to doubting and questioning Jesus, saying

“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3).

How can you and I prevent ourselves from drifting into that place of sorrow like Jeremiah, discouragement like Job, or giving up hope like John the Baptist?

As I thought about this and considered the Scriptures, I believe it’s all about perspective. You see, the only thing that changed for John was his perspective; the only thing that shifted from that moment of glory at Jesus baptism was the fact that he was now in prison, but a prison perspective will always cause you to doubt your destiny. In other words, you could experience great moments of faith, believing that great things are going to happen in your life, when suddenly you find yourself going through a difficult time. You thought your life was going in one direction but now you’re going in the opposite direction.

Maybe you look at your life and you thought you’d be farther along in ministry than you are right now, and so you begin to doubt the plan and purpose of God. For some of you, maybe it’s not even so much God that you’re struggling with, but maybe it’s that somebody hurt you, maybe it’s in your marriage, maybe somebody let you down, or maybe its yourself. It could be that habit, that destructive, repetitive sin that you keep trying to overcome, and you keep failing, and you’re wondering how could God love somebody like you?

Well, if that’s where you are today, I want to encourage you and let you know that God loves you, he cares for you, and he’s a God of second chances. In fact, as you explore the pages of Scripture, you’ll find that God loves people through their pain, through their mistakes, and through their failures. But one thing that really stands out to me is the fact that God is so much more interested in our future than he is in our failures.

Just think about Simon Peter for a moment, he couldn’t even get a job in the church today if he wanted to. I mean, his life was a wreck, he was violent, he’d cut a guys ear off, he cursed all the time, he would say one thing and then do something else. Not only that but Peter was so proud, he thought he was all that and a bag of chips, and yet Jesus loved him. In fact, on the night before Jesus’ crucifixion, they’re sitting around the table and Simon Peter looks at Jesus, and he was dead serious, he says this in front of all of them,

"Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death” (Luke 22:33).

Jesus turns to him with such love and says,

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail…” (Luke 22:31-32).

Now, I think this has probably got to be one of the strangest prayers in the Bible, because Jesus prays that his faith would not fail, but then he says when you fail, “when you’ve turned back, strengthen your brothers.” In other words, not only are you going to fail, but you’re going to fail three times before the night is over. Nonetheless, as many times as you mess up, Jesus tells Peter, “My compassions fail not, I’ve still got a place for you, a position for you. And so, he says, “Go, feed my sheep” (John 21:17). And this was a pivotal moment in the life and ministry of the apostle Peter because of the Lord’s mercy.

In Mark chapter 9, there is another great example of a person struggling with unmet expectations. Mark tells us about a man who brought his son to Jesus who was possessed by a deaf and mute spirit. He’d already brought his son to Jesus’ disciples and they had been unable to cast out the Spirit. And so, now he’s got this doubt in his mind because of the disciples, he’s struggling with these unmet expectations, and he brings his son to Jesus asking,

“If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. ‘If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:22-24).

And so, here’s this father standing before Jesus, pleading with him, hoping for a miracle, asking for help with his unbelief, help with his doubts, and Jesus responds to him with such grace. He doesn’t tell him to go get more faith, or to read his Bible more, or spend more time in fasting and prayer, but Jesus simply took his son and healed him.

“He said, "You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out” (Mark 9:25-26).

I love this because it’s such a beautiful picture of the grace of God. In spite of this man’s doubt and discouragement, regardless of his fear that maybe there wasn’t any hope for his son, God still showed up.

I hope that today you can find some encouragement in that, in the midst of whatever challenges, pain, heartache, or suffering you may be facing today, because God is still there. In Isaiah chapter 41, he said,

“I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:9-10).

In other words, he didn’t say that life is going to be easy, he never said you wouldn’t have any problems, but what he did say was,

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

And so, it’s important that you understand that he’s with you even in your doubt, even in your fear, and he’s going to hold your hand every step of the way. You will have trouble, but he said, “I will help you and I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” And so, even in your unbelief, even when you’ve lost all hope, Jesus can still show up.

In fact, the Bible tells us that after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples had heard that he was alive, but it was just a rumor, at this point they still hadn’t seen him. For the disciples, this weekend had been like a bad dream, they’re fearful and in hiding, literally scared to death that what happened to Jesus was going to happen to them. And in John chapter 20, verse 19, the Bible tells us,

“The disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" (John 20:19).

In other words, they’re not believing, they’re not trusting, they’re fearful and anxious, they’re in hiding when Jesus appears. Notice that he’s not standing at the door knocking, he’s not waiting for someone to hear his voice and open the door, but he came right in and stood among them. That’s important when you feel like you’re trapped, when you’re alone and afraid, because no matter what you’re facing or where you are, Jesus can always get in. Nothing can stop him from getting to you, no door,

“Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39)

And so, today if you’re struggling with fear or feelings of doubt, I hope this will encourage you, because verse 24 is just so powerful, John tells us,

“Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So, the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" (John 20:24-25).

Now, some of you have had an experience like that where you missed something amazing and everybody’s talking about it, but you weren’t there. Maybe you had to work, but whatever it was, you couldn’t make it, and now nobody will stop talking about it. Well, that’s exactly what happened to Thomas, and he gets so sick and tired of hearing about it, that he draws a line in the sand. He puts this qualifier on his faith and says,

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it” (John 20:25).

Now, obviously this is a dangerous place to be, to put conditions on your faith, but out of exasperation Thomas finally says, “I will not believe unless Jesus does this and this and this.”

Well, “a week later the disciples were in the house again and this time Thomas was with them.” The Bible says,

“Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:26-28).

What I find so amazing about this is that Jesus has already showed up for everybody else, but now he’s making an encore appearance for just that one that was missing.

I want to encourage you today that Jesus is still showing up for that one, he knows where you are, and he has come for you. And so, what do you do, or what should you do when you don’t have any faith? Well, I believe we can learn from the example of Thomas, because he doubted, he didn’t believe, and so, what did Thomas do? He stayed around people who had faith, he stayed with the disciples, he stayed with the church, he didn’t run off and try to do it alone. He didn’t try to figure it out by himself, but he stayed with the people who could encourage him in his faith.

Today, if you’re sitting here or you’re watching online and you’re fearful, doubting, and you don’t have any faith. I want to encourage you right now to get into the church on Sundays, to get into Bible study on Wednesday nights, and if the doors are open, I want to encourage you to be here and to serve, because not only will the faith of your brothers and sisters in Christ lift you up, but the Lord said,

“I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

And so, as we close, here is what I want you to understand, the Lord will show up just for you. In fact, Jesus said it this way,

“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11).

This is a promise from the word of God, he wants to give good gifts to those who ask him, but anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, he came just for you, to remove your fear, to take away your doubts, and to help you overcome your unbelief. But even in the midst of your doubts, he is still with you, because he never left you, and he’s never going to leave you. And so, let’s go to him in prayer, let’s seek him and ask him.

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October 10, 2021

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*Graphics, notes, and commentary from LifeChurch, Ministry Pass, PC Study Bible, Preaching Library, and Sermon Central. Scripture from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.*