

The People Were Waiting Expectantly

☆ **What should we do? (vv.7-14)**

☆ **Whom should we believe? (vv.15-18)**

They still hate me, all of them. But I don't hate them anymore because I know God doesn't hate me. It's all so strange being a tax collector in Israel. My whole family is still dead set against me, even more than before. I can't blame them. My father was a priest in the temple. He knew John's father Zechariah. They served together. But when I became a tax collector for the Romans, my family disowned me. At the time I was super angry, but it doesn't bother me so much now. Ever since that day when I was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, life is so different. I help the poor. I love to give. God led me on a different road that day. This one goes to glory with God.

☆ **What should we do? (vv.7-14)**

Now I totally get it. I know why people hate tax collectors. "Publicans!" they call us and then spit on the ground and rub it in with their foot. It's because we're all Jews, but we tax collectors work for the Romans. It's hard to find easier money. Everyone has to pay whatever we tell them. No forms to fill out. Nothing to file. Pontius Pilate and the Herodian kings let us take whatever we want. As long as they get enough for Rome and themselves, everybody's happy – well, except for the people.

We publicans have a saying, "Every way for them to pay." Along the "King's Highway," we had it made in the shade. There was plenty of road from the Gulf of Aqabah all the way up to Damascus in Syria. We Jews couldn't control the whole highway, but Rome did. Anywhere east of the Dead Sea and on up the morning side of the Jordan valley, we could find a good spot for a booth. I always laughed when a caravan came around the bend or popped over the rise. They wanted to run, but it was the only road. We'd hit them once and run up ahead to hit them again and again. Mobility was the key, plus our enforcers. If anyone argued, "my boys" were there, Roman soldiers with strong arms and deep pockets.

That all changed for me one day on my way to Jerusalem. I had heard about the son of my father's fellow priest. His name was John. "Strange dude," is what you'd call him. Everything about him was rough. Clothes made of camel's hair. Food from locusts and wild honey. John was baptizing near little Bethany on the other side of the Jordan. I stumbled onto him almost by accident, at least it seemed that way at the time. Now I'm sure it was no accident. God was leading me all along.

*Huge crowds were streaming out of Jerusalem. It was downhill to the Jordan for them, 6,000 – 7,000 feet drop in elevation. Whole families, young and old, kids and adults, everyone came, even temple officials, scribes and Pharisees. I stopped to listen with them. At first, I did not like what John was saying at all: "**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?**" That really hurt! I wondered why anyone would want to listen to that. But I knew John was right about me. I had been like a snake along the road, biting people as they passed and rushing ahead to bite them again. As long as my family hated me, I had no use for God. I figured I'd find as much fun as I could and let the chips fall where they may. But John was talking about God's coming "**wrath.**" I knew I was in big trouble.*

*John kept talking about a better: "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**" He was telling all of us to change our minds about sin and self and God. Our God created all things and rules in the heavens, and He was coming near. John quoted Isaiah, one of my father's favorite prophets: "**Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.**" (Matthew 3:2f)*

He had my attention now. People were scared and kept asking, “**What should we do?**” He told the crowds to share their extra clothes and food. I saw other tax collectors there too. We looked at each other and then without even thinking I blurted out, “**Teacher, what should we do?**” I was so afraid of God’s wrath, I was actually glad when John said, “**Don’t collect any more than you are required to.**” Some of my soldiers couldn’t help themselves either. I’ve never seen those men with fear in their eyes. They asked, “**And what should we do?**” Their days of legalized extortion were over. John said, “**Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.**” It was a whole new way of life for me and the soldiers and all the people. It was a life of repentance.

☆ Whom should we believe? (vv.15-18)

Ever since I left home, I’ve been anything but religious. Whenever I went to Jerusalem, I avoided the temple, paid the Romans and played with the rest. But all that changed after I heard the rest of what John had to say. He kept talking about someone coming after him, so powerful and important that John said he wasn’t even worthy help with his sandals.

The Jews from Jerusalem wanted to know more about John too. They thought he might be Elijah or the Prophet Moses spoke about. But John said, “No, not them and no, **I am not the Christ.**” They kept pressing. I wanted to know too. “**Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?**”

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “**I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’**” (John 1:23 NIV84) That reminded me of something else Isaiah said, one of my mother’s favorite passages: “**Come now, let us reason together,**” says the LORD. “**Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.**” (Isaiah 1:18) God could make me clean inside and out! John said, “**I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**” At first I didn’t know what he meant. Later I realized there is only “**one baptism**” (Ephesians 4:5), because none of us baptized by John had to get baptized again. After Jesus rose from the dead, He explained, “**John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**” (Acts 1:5) That all happened on Pentecost when the Lord poured out His Holy Spirit on the apostles. And the baptism of fire? John explained that was God’s wrath coming down hard on all who would not listen. (Luke 3:16-18) I knew I was going to keep listening. I knew who to believe, John and the One who came after him.

As I said before, I wasn’t the only tax collector who heard John preaching the Good News about the coming Christ. My good friend Matthew was there too. Later on we heard John filled with joy and pointing to a man coming toward him. John said, “**There He is! Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**” (John 1:29) I felt the joy too. I’m so worldly, but my sins are all forgiven. Matthew threw a party for all of us so we could be with Jesus. It was wonderful to hear Him!

We had another tax collector friend you’ve probably heard of. He liked to climb up on things because he was so short. I was following in a crowd with Jesus one day, and He stopped right under a fig tree. He looked up and there was my friend. Jesus said, “**Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.**” Jesus invited Himself over! People were complaining; they still hate us “Publicans!” But Jesus went to dinner anyway. I’ll never forget Zacchaeus’ joy when he said, “**Look, Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.**” Then Jesus warmed me through and through: “**Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.**”

I once was lost, but now I’m found. Glory be to Jesus! Amen.