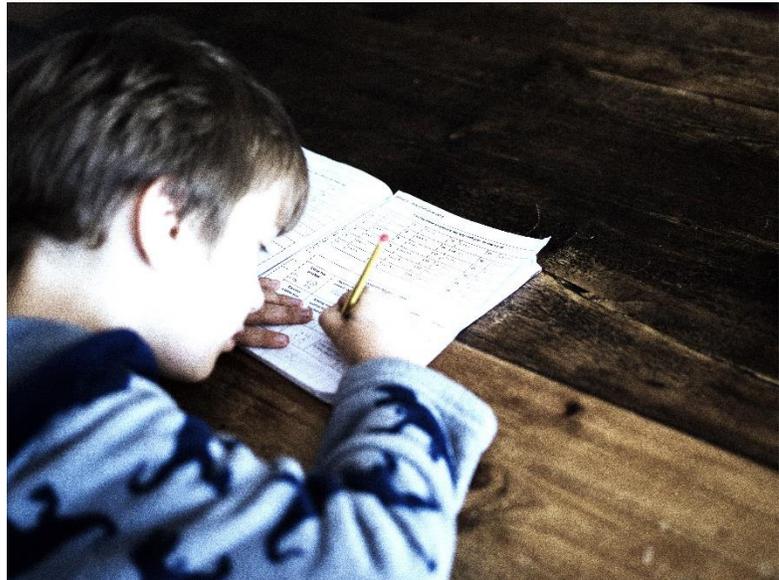


**Faith, Followers, and Failures – When Your Predicament Doesn't Match the Promises
From the Series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe"
By Phil Brainerd**

Introduction

I grew up in a place where the local school district wanted to be 'scientific'. So, they gave children psychological tests. IQ tests, mental maturity tests, and others. One of the tests they gave us was called, "What's wrong with this picture?" A psychologist somewhere creates a series of pictures that have a mistake. Sometimes the mistake is obvious. Sometimes, it's harder.



For example, let's say I showed you a picture of a beautiful, tropical, sunny beach. Then, I put in the middle of it a picture of an ice skater. Most people would know that you need ice to be an ice skater. And there isn't any ice in the picture. Or maybe you would see a beautiful green, grassy field. In the middle of the field is a rowboat with a man fishing. Well, obviously you need water to go fishing, not grass.

Games like "What's wrong with this picture" can be fun, and perhaps helpful if they're properly used by an educator or a psychologist. But sometimes, we face situations in life where we expect something, and something else happens. Sometimes, it's funny. Sometimes though, it's painful.

I had an experience some years ago that fit into this. I was coming home from a long road trip. It was late in the evening, so, I was tired. There was a red light ahead with one car stopped. I pulled up behind the car and stopped also.

Then, the light changed. The first car started to go. I followed. At this point, something odd happened: The car ahead of me stopped before leaving the intersection. There was some construction going on. Maybe they were confused? Maybe they had been drinking? Who knows? Whatever the reason, this left me sitting in the middle of the intersection.

Then, the light turned yellow. The car in front of me finally moved forward. At this point, I had a choice: If I stood still, I would be sitting in the middle of the intersection blocking traffic. Who wants that? So, I proceeded to move forward.

Right then, I saw those lights - Those flashing lights that tell you that you have a police car behind you. I noticed that, the minute the lights came on, the car in front of me – the one that was going really slowly a minute ago – somehow found the energy to speed up. It started going fast – really fast. I recall that we were on a hill, and at the top of the hill was a traffic light that had turned red. *The car went right through the red light - At high speed!*

So I thought, “Well, we’re about to see some justice. The police officer behind me is going after that bad boy.” I pulled over to let the police car go after that criminal. However, instead of going after the criminal, the police car stopped behind me. A moment later, I was involved in a discussion with a police officer concerning where my car was when the light turned yellow. It seems the officer acted like he had not seen the car in front of me. So, in his mind, I was the criminal.

After a short discussion, it became clear that the officer did not have enough evidence to charge me with a traffic violation. However, when I stopped the moment before, I took off my seatbelt so that I could get driver's license out of the wallet in my pocket. Well, before I knew it, I had had a ticket for driving without a seatbelt.

I thought to myself, “What’s wrong with this picture?”

Sometimes, life throws us into situations that don’t make sense. We expect one thing, and something else happens. In normal life, it’s bad enough. But sometimes we face issues of faith. It seems like, if there is a good God, the world should work a certain way. But sometimes, in fact often times, it works in a very different way than what we would expect. What do we do on those days? Do we conclude that there is no God? Do we conclude that maybe there is a God, but he’s not good? Sometimes people who want to believe that there is a God, and that he is good, struggle.

We’re going to meet someone today who faced that struggle.

We’ve been working our way through the book of Matthew. Matthew wanted all his friends to know about Jesus. So, he wrote a book. We just finished chapter 10, where we met the apostles of Jesus, his “sent ones.” Jesus prepared these men to enter a sort of battlefield. He just sent them out. We see that in the first verse of chapter 11:

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. (Matthew 11:1)

In chapters 11 and 12, we're going to see Matthew change his focus. Jesus is going to teach and preach. We'll look at what Jesus has to say, of course. However, in this section, Matthew is going to concentrate on various reactions that Jesus received.

So, today, we're going to start a new series: Faith, Followers, and Failures. As Jesus teaches, some will respond with faith. Some will follow. Some, sadly will fail in different ways.

As I said, today, we're going to meet someone who struggled. So, today's message is entitled: "When your predicament doesn't match the promise." Let's read:

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."
(Matthew 11:2-6)

Let's take this apart. First, we have a predicament. Let's see what it is: "When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah..." This is John the Baptist. We can see that he is in prison. Prison in those days was very different than it is today. Prison was usually in a dark, dingy building. Your cell may be nothing more than a pit. Or, your cell may be not much more than a small closet with stone walls. You might be able to wander in this area the size of a small closet. Or, you might be chained to a wall.

There's no climate control. If it's hot outside, you're hot. If it's cold outside, you're cold. Your food is likely just bread and water - And not much of it. It's horrible.

Compare this to the life John lived before his arrest. He lived in the wilderness. We're told he spent a lot of his time baptizing near the Jordan River. Today, we tend to see a lot of deserts in the Middle East. But if you're near a river in the right season, it can be beautiful. It's sunny with moderate temperatures. John spent most of his life as an outdoorsman. It's not a life of luxury, but to some, it's the best way to live.

What changed? John was a righteous man. In our next session, we'll learn that Jesus identified him as a great prophet. Great prophets speak the words of God. If those are good and encouraging words, everyone is happy. But sometimes, prophets are called upon to issue stern words: Words of warning - Words that call out sin. On one occasion, John was called upon to speak the second kind of words.

The man who was king at the time was Herod the second. He wasn't quite as evil as his father, Herod the Great, but he was bad. On a trip to Rome, he saw his brother's wife and fell in love with her. He seduced her and stole her from his own brother. Herod divorced his own wife to do so.

According to the law of Moses, this was unlawful on many levels. It was wrong for anyone, much less a man claiming to be a legitimate leader of the Hebrew people.

So, John did what a good prophet would do. He called out Herod for his sin. The result? Herod had John arrested and thrown into prison. The only thing that kept Herod from killing John right away was fear that an execution might cause an uprising.

Did John deserve to be in prison? Was he a murderer or some other kind of lawbreaker? No. He was a righteous man obeying God. In fact, it was the law breaker who threw John into prison.

We've just seen the predicament. A righteous man is wasting away in prison. His only crime is being obedient to his God, and doing so in a way that showed great courage.

II. The Promise

What was John expecting? Let's look at the promise that John and many of the people of ancient Israel were relying on.

13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

Looking at what we just read, if someone were to ask you, "What would the Messiah look like?", how would you respond? Many in ancient Israel would have said the Messiah would be a conquering king. He was going to come from the clouds and kick out any evil people who are oppressing the Hebrews. Everyone would recognize that he is the great King. Not just the people of Israel, but everyone all over the planet.

Is that happening here? To be blunt, no. Jesus has spent a considerable time doing public ministry. He's found a group of who, not to be mean, were a group of nobodies. There were four fishermen and a tax collector. At least the fishermen were honest. Tax collectors were dishonest and hated.

John is hearing reports of miracles, but where's the conquering king? There's nothing. And to top it all off, John is languishing in prison. Shouldn't king Herod be one of the evil people who gets kicked out?

You could imagine John quietly asking: "What's wrong with this picture?"

So, John has a dilemma. He's in a predicament. He believes he has a promise. The predicament and the promise don't appear to match.

What does he do?

III. The Question

John decides to ask a question. Let's read about it.

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

John sends his disciples to Jesus. He asks a very straightforward and sincere question: "Did I make a mistake? Are you the one, or should we all wait for someone else?"

Here's an important principle. John is a great prophet. We can take great encouragement in knowing and even great prophets struggle with their faith. Let's listen to what King David wrote centuries before the time of Jesus:

13 As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
14 for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
(Psalm 103:13-14)

When the people of God struggle, he understands. He has compassion. But even more than simple encouragement, God gives his children something more: We are given permission to ask questions. All over the Bible, people ask questions of God. So that's what John does_ He asks.

How does Jesus respond?

III. The Promise, More Fully Understood.

He responds by helping John to more fully understand the promises.

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 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. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." (Matthew 11:4-6)

When the children of God approach him with sincere questions, he answers. He may not answer the way we expect, but he answers.

It's important to understand something here: When John asked, "Are you the one?", Jesus could have just replied with a simple "yes" or "no". Or, he could have replied with a rebuke. He could have said, "yes, stupid."

But no. Jesus gave an answer tailored to John. John was a great prophet, but he was still a man. He was a man who struggled with his faith. So, Jesus gave him more than an answer - He gave John help. The answer he gave was something we've become familiar with in our study of Matthew: Messianic prophecy. The prophet Isaiah predicted the Messiah 700 years before. Here's one of the things he said:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
(Isaiah 35:5-6)

Jesus tells John, "Yes, I am the one. And here's how you know: I'm showing you evidence - I'm showing the world the credentials of the Messiah." Those are sufficient words of encouragement for a man of God like John. That's what John needed.

But Jesus gave him even more. Jesus was explaining that there is more than one promise of the Messiah. It's interesting, Jesus could have quoted another passage from Isaiah. Here it is:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
(Isaiah 61:1-2)

That passage talks about good news to the poor. It also talks about freedom for prisoners. However, that wasn't to be the case for John. Jesus is saying, the Messiah will return one day as a conquering King. He will wipe out all evil. But that time has not come yet. The prisoners will one day be released, but not now.

John knew the Scriptures well enough that he could have seen the difference between the two passages, and why Jesus quoted one and not the other..

Then Jesus finishes: “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

So there is a hint here. Jesus is saying: “John, hang on. You will not be released from prison. There will be another path for you.” Jesus gave John all he needed to walk the path that God had for him. Jesus reminded him that if he could just hang on, there would be a great reward waiting for him in eternity.

Blessed are those who understand that God is not always what we expect.

IV. What does this mean for us?

So, what does this all mean for us? First, as I said earlier, it’s comforting to know that even great prophets experience struggles with their faith. That’s encouraging when we struggle. It’s wonderful to know that the same God who acts like a father showing compassion is still here today. If you struggle, God knows about it - And he understands.

Next, it’s OK to ask questions. We’ve talked about this in the past, so I’ll just remind everyone that attitude is everything when we ask questions. Sometimes people ask questions with a fist raised in the air. People who do that should not expect compassion and answers. However, when people ask God sincere questions, often times he does answer. ***We just need to understand that sometimes the answer isn’t what we might expect.*** God’s Word is full of promises. However, not all the promises are fulfilled at the same time. Sometimes, it’s tempting to pick the promises that give us the most hope at any given moment.

For example, the ancient Hebrew people liked the promise of a conquering king. Until he arrived, though, there would be suffering along with the successes. The promises for times of suffering involve the assurance that God is aware of our pain. Our Lord Jesus Christ came to earth and suffered more than we can ever understand. One of the reasons he did that is so that he can walk with us and understand when we suffer.

John needed to understand that the promises of God are wider than what he understood. Sometimes, we need that, too.

Let’s pull this all together.

Conclusion

We’re calling our new series, “Faith, Followers, and Failures.” Was John a failure because he struggled with faith? Not at all! Jesus gave John what he needed. That allowed him to endure the suffering that followed. In the end, the story of John the Baptist is a story of faith, in spite of the fact that he struggled along the way.

That can be our story, too. It can be our story if we will learn to call upon our God when we need help. Even when our predicament doesn't look like it matches the promise. Just be ready for the answer. The answer may involve a wider set of promises than we realize.

But in the end, the promise is the same for us that it was for John the Baptist. Those who believe in Jesus will one day see eternal life. Whatever else we see along the way, that promise gives us the hope to endure - Even when it looks like there's something wrong with the picture.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:
PeaceWithGod.net