

What can we learn from those people in the Gospels who chose not to follow Jesus? Thanks to Derek Cooper and Ed Czerwski, we can use their example to avoid shaping Jesus according to our expectations rather than as he is presented in the Gospels. I recommend this well-written book to all who want their false assumptions exposed in order to have their faith strengthened and deepened.

—TREMPER LONGMAN III, Robert H. Gundry professor of biblical studies, Westmont College

We've asked ourselves for years, "What would Jesus do?" *Unfollowers* gets me to ask myself "What would *I* do around Jesus?" This question yields a more compelling and convincing insight into my character. Christ compels me through its pages.

—DAVID DRURY, author, speaker, and chief of staff to the General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church

In this challenging and engaging book, Cooper and Czerwski help us place ourselves in the shoes of Jesus' original audience. As we engage with the realities of these often-ignored or even despised characters in the Bible and their interactions with Jesus, we find ourselves in their stories and both our faith and our practice is challenged in new ways.

—KATHY ESCOBAR, copastor of The Refuge and author of *Down We Go*

*Unfollowers* made me laugh . . . and gulp. Weaving biblical observations with contemporary narratives, the authors take readers on a journey of replacing the messiah we create in our own image with the real Sabbath-breaking, wine-making, table-shaking Son of God. If maintaining the status quo is your goal, run—do not walk—away from this book.

—DR. SANDRA GLAHN, associate professor of media arts and worship at Dallas Theological Seminary and author of the Coffee Cup Bible Study series

*Unfollowers* is only for those brave enough to confront the possibility that Jesus might be calling us to leave our own unfollowing for a life of radical discipleship. Derek Cooper and Ed Czerwski recapture the prophetic edge of the Gospels by holding up these stories of failure as a mirror into our own hearts. This book has the power to transform where we find ourselves in the biblical story.

—J. R. DANIEL KIRK, associate professor of New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary

Who wants to focus on the dropouts and doubters? Scripture does. And Cooper and Cyzewski follow the Bible's example, apparently believing the radical notion that all Scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching. They take readers into unexplored areas of the Gospels that are typically ignored, and in doing so enlighten, encourage, and exhort readers into a deeper relationship with their Lord and Master. I have no doubt that readers will profit from their wisdom.

—DAVID T. LAMB, author of *God Behaving Badly*

A jolt for those who are a little too comfortable with the Jesus they think they know.

—JAROD OSBORNE, author of *Jaded Faith*

Ed and Derek open our eyes to a unique and fascinating examination of what a faithful disciple looks like—and from a narrative that most of us have never considered. Beware: This book may cause you to become a follower of the true Messiah!

—JEREMY SUMMERS, author and director of adult spiritual formation of The Wesleyan Church

Many who study the Gospels consider the stories of faithful disciples and followers of Jesus. Few have taken time to examine those who chose not to follow Jesus. In this easily accessible book for pastors and laypeople, the authors help us consider ten types of people who chose not to follow Jesus. This clever book will help you appreciate those who said no to following Jesus so that you may say yes to Jesus in a better way.

—H. DRAKE WILLIAMS, III, Ph.D., academic dean, Tyndale Theological Seminary

We all need help in seeing, loving, trusting, and surrendering. By taking a thoughtful and historical look at the “unfollowers” of Jesus, Derek and Ed help us see Christ clearer, love and trust him more, and freshly surrender our lives to him. By looking at the unfollowers, we learn to follow him closer.

—J. R. WOODWARD, national director of the V3 Church Planting Movement and author of *Creating a Missional Culture*

# **UN**FOLLOWERS

UNLIKELY LESSONS ON FAITH FROM THOSE WHO DOUBTED JESUS

Derek Cooper  
Ed Cyzewski



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For a free download of a group study for each chapter, visit [wphresources.com/unfollowers](http://wphresources.com/unfollowers).

## PREFACE

**W**ho wrote this book? That is a common question for coauthored projects, and answering it requires a little background.

I (Ed) first thought of this book concept while in seminary, but when I decided to pursue it as a book project, I asked Derek to work with me at a very early point. Since then, Derek and I have shared notes and revised drafts over the years, each chapter representing a blend of our ideas. After we finally put together a proposal, Derek took a scattered set of chapter ideas and systematically combed through the Gospels to make sure we represented as many stories as possible without repeating ourselves. The book has a far sharper focus and more orderly presentation

because of his work. Derek also wrote extensive notes for each chapter, providing background information, interpretive options, and application ideas. I used Derek's notes to write each chapter. I also wrote almost all of the short anecdotes and personal stories. Derek reviewed each chapter, removed my puns, and cleaned up any confusing parts. I reviewed Derek's changes, stuck a few puns back in, and smoothed out anything that didn't quite fit.

As a general rule, if you think this book is intelligent and well-researched, you can thank Derek. If you're wondering where a play on words came from, you can thank me.

# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

## **ED'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Kevin Scott of Wesleyan Publishing House took me out for coffee to discuss book ideas. I had a lot of them, but I held one back because I didn't have a good title for it yet. After our coffee had gone cold, I finally mentioned, "There is this project that my friend and I have been working on. I love it, but I can't quite sum it up very well. I need to work with an editor who has a vision for this project." *Unfollowers* was that book project, and I'm grateful that Kevin had the vision and words of encouragement to help make this book a reality. I'm grateful for his support and expertise.

I can't say enough good things about my coauthor, Derek Cooper, even if I can think of some bad things like his love for Dallas sports teams. Derek has added order, insight, and excellent ideas throughout the planning and writing stages. His research and application points are excellent, and I marvel at his time management abilities. He caught large and small mistakes while also providing a firm grasp of how these various stories intersected throughout the Gospels. His appendix that lists every "unfollower" in the Gospels is but a small sample of his conscientious work and knowledge of the Scriptures.

Books aren't written without a strong support network, and my wife, Julie, has been that for me over and over again. Despite her hectic graduate school schedule, she graciously chipped in when deadlines loomed to keep me on task. Writing a book can be a tremendous source of stress, and Julie has been an unwavering source of support, wisdom, and love through it all.

David Drury has been a wonderful encouragement and an early supporter of this book. Matthew Paul Turner routinely offered sage advice. My e-newsletter subscribers read some early chapter drafts and offered great feedback, including Tanya Marlow, John Nunnikhoven, and many others I've surely overlooked. Vince Gierer, Emma Liddle, and several others at St. Paul's Church provided key insights for several chapters, especially for Pilate, Caiaphas, and Judas. My agent Karen Neumair has been beautifully blunt and continually constructive with her feedback.

I'm grateful for the team at WPH who were continually positive and helpful throughout the entire publication process. It's almost like this partnership was predestined.

## **DEREK'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

In addition to recognizing Karen Neumair, Kevin Scott, and Wesleyan Publishing House, I would like to thank my good friend and coauthor, Ed Cyzewski. In some circles, I have become “that guy” who writes books with some other guy whose name is apparently very hard to pronounce. This book is not going to make things easier. Not only is my coauthor’s name still difficult to pronounce, but we have also made up a new word in the title of the book! Either way, I’m delighted to be associated with Ed once again. It’s wonderful to have a friend I can bounce ideas off of, even ones that turn out to not be very good. In this case, we are excited to present a topic that we have tossed back and forth for some time. Here’s to the next book, Ed!

I would also like to thank the beautiful and kind woman who is my wife, Barb. Because the ink in my pen would dry before I could finish saying enough good things about Barb, I will just give her my thanks and all the love that resides in my heart. It is nothing but joy to live life with her and our three children. Thank you for your love and support!

# INTRODUCTION

## A MESSIAH WHO DIDN'T FIT THE JOB DESCRIPTION

**I**f I made a list of what a modern-day messiah should do, I would create a balanced, sensible list. I'd like a messiah to be powerful enough to solve my problems and defeat evil. He would challenge me to change my life, but at my own pace.

I assume that any messiah would rescue the faithful from hell. He'd also save the environment from destruction. He'd shop at thrift stores and serve up fair trade, organic coffee—certainly light roast. My kind of messiah would write on a regular basis, enjoy gardening, and squeeze in service to others when possible. I suppose watching hockey would be optional. I'd also keep the part about turning water into wine. In short, my description of a

messiah is basically an awesome version of me who bears minimal resemblance to the Jesus of the Gospels.

My list probably sounds pretty ridiculous to you. That's because you know that Jesus would never resemble the character I described in my list. You have your own list of expectations for a modern-day messiah. Other versions of the messiah croon old hymns, spend hours studying the Bible, drink craft beers while chatting about theology, start evangelistic conversations everywhere they go, play soccer, compare everything spiritual to the military, lift their hands during worship, advocate for political reforms, go on mission trips, or reward the faithful with fancy cars and big homes.

To one degree or another, we all imagine that Jesus looks just like us and wants the same things as us.

My friend Chad has a picture of a smiling and winking Jesus figurine on his blog giving the thumbs-up to all who drop by for a visit. When I think about Jesus dropping by my home and learning about what I do, I tend to imagine him looking something like that. We'd chat for a bit and then, with a smile, a wink, and a thumbs-up, he'd walk out the door to tell my neighbors across the alley to let their barking dog inside. "Keep up the good work!" he yells to me from the street as he walks away.

My smiling, winking Jesus met his match one day. In fact, while in seminary, I realized that Jesus may not have spent too much time smiling and winking at people like me. Obsessed with the right answers, short on service to others, and prone to judgment, I saw that I had far more in common with the Pharisees and Sadducees who opposed Jesus.

## WHO WAS ON JESUS' SIDE?

It's never a good day when you realize you have quite a bit in common with the villains of the Bible. It's even worse when you've made this discovery while in seminary.

I used to always identify with the heroes in the Bible. Who wants to be the villain? If ten out of twelve spies didn't want to invade Canaan, I'd surely be one of the two who trusted God to lead the way. If the entire nation of Israel turned to Baal worship, I'd be hiding in a cave with Elijah's seven thousand faithful Israelites. If nine of ten healed lepers failed to follow Jesus, I'd be the one who returned to say thank you.

It never occurred to me that I could have anything in common with the crowds who yawned at or mocked Jesus' message. Even worse than that, how could I have any similarities with the opponents of Jesus?

The more I considered what kind of messiah I expected to find in the Bible, the more I saw the ways I'd misconstrued Jesus and remade him into my image. I didn't have all that much in common with Jesus. In fact, I had way more in common with the Pharisees. The Pharisees had very set beliefs about who God is, what God does, and God's plans for the future. They knew the Bible way better than I ever will. If anyone could be described as eager for God to show up, they've certainly got me beat since I don't live under a brutal Roman military occupation. Every time I found the Pharisees, I tried to stick myself in their shoes—or sandals if you will. Each time, their sandals felt eerily familiar and comfortable.

After reading the Bible from their perspective, I began to understand them, though of course I didn't have a “pro-Pharisee” reading of the Bible. I didn't make a WWPD bracelet. They certainly weren't misunderstood heroes by any means. But I could

see their airtight theology, how they expected the Messiah to be just like themselves, and how Jesus completely defied their expectations. I understood what they expected God to do, and how Jesus just couldn't work as the Messiah in light of that. When they stood on the sidelines criticizing the miracles and compassion of Jesus, I saw people who applied the Bible a little too ignorantly. The more I observed their behavior, the more I saw myself.

The Pharisees, like all of us, apparently expected a messiah who looked like themselves and fit the job description they'd created over time. When Jesus challenged their conception of what a messiah is and does—even overturning their dearly held practices and beliefs—they refused to follow someone who didn't affirm themselves or their beliefs. Just as I'd created a winking and smiling Jesus giving me a thumbs-up, the Pharisees imagined the Messiah would give them a pat on the back. When the Messiah didn't look like them, they dismissed him. In that moment of revelation in seminary, I had to decide whether I wanted to follow the Jesus in the Gospels who healed, challenged, and blessed, or settle for a messiah who is nothing more than a slightly better caricature of myself.

Reeling in shock from the loss of my lighthearted thumbs-up Jesus, I mentioned my struggles in an online chat with a friend. He wasn't surprised. "Yeah," he typed. "I often wonder if I'm the kind of guy who would have mocked Jesus. That haunts me for sure." The thought of identifying with the mockers of Jesus, someone other than the Pharisees, opened up a whole new line of thinking. The religion scholars weren't the only ones who had a tough time figuring out Jesus. I realized that there's much more to the story of those who didn't follow Jesus than my affinity

with the Pharisees. In fact, the Gospels are filled with their stories, even if these “unfollowers” merely lurk in the background of the stories, never moving to center stage.

During Jesus’ time, there was never a unified view of the Messiah. Instead, there were many different groups of Jews in Jesus’ day that held contrary views of what it even meant to be a Jew. Nevertheless, it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus consistently defied the people’s expectations of what the Messiah would be and do. Apparently, for instance, no one expected a messiah to heal or do anything perceived as “work” on the Sabbath, hang out with notorious sinners, forgive women caught in adultery, violate hand-washing traditions, downplay the importance of the temple, peacefully resist the despised Roman overlords, or insult the religious authorities. In short, although there was never a single poster in the Holy Land titled “The Job Description of the Messiah,” whatever expectations the Jews had about the Messiah were different from Jesus’ actions.

Besides these expectations that kept people from following Jesus, I began to notice many other reasons people chose to “unfollow” Jesus. I saw people who were busy, skeptical, greedy, and distracted by their own religious practices and preferences. I saw people—good, honest, hard-working people—who remained in the background of the gospel stories, observing from the crowds but never committing to become a disciple. In fact, most of the crowds in the Gospels could be described as rather indifferent, not choosing to follow or oppose Jesus but always grateful for a free lunch or a nifty miracle story. They were committed to reading the Scriptures in the synagogue and waiting for the Messiah, but they didn’t really want to disrupt their lives. They certainly weren’t going to take any risks for the sake of this new

miracle worker allegedly born out of wedlock. Jesus was merely a nice carpenter who hailed from a completely insignificant village in the northern part of Israel that was far removed from the religious and political epicenter in Jerusalem. Many of the people who listened to Jesus didn't necessarily oppose Jesus, but then again, they didn't want him making their lives any more complicated than they already were. Some regarded him as a great healer and magician, but few were willing to follow him at all costs.

While the Gospels share stories of successful disciples and tell us to follow Jesus, they also tell us quite a lot about the expectations that can keep us from truly knowing Jesus and the obstacles that can prevent us from following him. With only the success stories of the Bible in mind, I quickly projected myself alongside Jesus—a Savior who was all smiles and thumbs-up. This is a natural trap that anyone can fall into.

I'd been missing out on the lessons from the non-disciples, those who unfollowed Jesus. Their stories provided the perfect foil for the faithful disciples, creating a contrast that helped me see my own expectations and potential barriers that could keep me from following Jesus. Years of studying the people who got it right only resulted in convincing me that *I* was right. Studying the people who got it wrong provided the most effective insight into the flaws of my own heart. Once I knew what a failed disciple looked like, I saw the faithful disciples with new eyes.

Though I'm convinced that I'm still on Jesus' side, the majority of the people in the gospel stories would have said they were on God's side. When I assert that I can figure out how to follow Jesus and that I can't possibly repeat their mistakes, I'm reminded that Jesus criticized his audience for mourning at the tombs of

the prophets while rejecting the fulfillment of their messages. In other words, it's possible to be on the same literal page as God in the Scriptures and not be on the same page as God. Though seeing, they didn't perceive its significance. Sinful patterns had infiltrated their lives and certain messianic expectations had clouded their minds, preventing them from joining God when he showed up among them.

The more I examined myself in light of the Pharisees—the indifferent, busy, and even hostile opponents of Jesus—the more I noticed troubling trends in my own life. I could be a critical, theological judge of Christians who were doing much more good for the kingdom than I was. I could judge people who advocated for the poor because they were relying on government over the church. I could underestimate the power of God. I could let doubts cloud my ability to hear God's voice in my daily life. I could ignore the restoring work of God around me. I could let my own priorities and dreams choke out the joy of knowing Jesus.

If we are made whole by confessing our sins to God, we need to detect them first. That's what makes the New Testament so fascinating to me: So many people didn't realize they were missing the Messiah due to their expectations, greed, indifference, fear, ambition, and beliefs. I'm not good at detecting my own flaws. Who wants to look at all of that?

My weakness at self-examination makes these stories all the more necessary for today. When we place ourselves in the shoes of Jesus' original audience, a strange feeling comes over us: We start to relate to them. When we empathize with their stories, we can start to identify the sins creeping up in our lives and confess them. A story about Caiaphas won't teach us all that much about salvation, but his story has much to teach us about divided

loyalties and the subtle ways hypocrisy twists good things into evil. When we encounter sin in full bloom in these stories, we have a kind of microscope through which we can examine the gravity of sin, seeing it for what it is, lest we go easy on ourselves. Sin is never a small matter. Doubt may be part of our growth process, but if left unaddressed, it can undermine our faith over time. Greed can skew our priorities to the point that we exploit others in ways we never could imagine. Judgment can cut us off from the love and healing of God. Theology can be used as a tool to divide and condemn people who may otherwise be our allies.

Let's face it, if God is working miracles, healing broken lives, and restoring justice in our world, we don't want to miss out on it. The disciples in the New Testament were on the front lines with the intense work of ministry, setting aside time for Jesus, and letting him guide them. The unfollowers sat back, avoiding direct involvement with that nice young carpenter from Galilee.

The first step in learning from those who unfollowed Jesus is entering into their world, understanding what they wanted out of life and the challenges they faced. We need to move beyond vague character sketches, stock characters, or one-dimensional renderings where the unfollowers merely serve as foils to the true disciples. From the perspective of the unfollowers, there were plenty of good reasons to avoid Jesus. If we can't understand these reasons and apply them to our own lives, what makes us so sure we'll do any better at following Jesus? How can we be sure we'll overcome the same obstacles that tripped up the majority of the people in Jesus' original audience? Before we can ask why each individual character failed to follow Jesus, we need to attempt to see the time of Christ through their eyes and the events that shaped their hopes for a specific kind of messiah.

## THE WORST HISTORY LESSON EVER

History wasn't the most cheerful subject for children growing up in Israel. Slavery, wandering in the desert, the constant threat of war, exile, poverty, and then exploitation by the Greek and Roman empires made for one tragic story after another. We're not talking about a recession or a bad season of network television. During the exile, an entire nation was uprooted from their homes, moved to a foreign land, and then experienced the constant threat of attack and oppression. A cross-country move in America is hard enough without a soldier jamming his sword in your back along the way. The history of Israel had some high points for sure, but the majority of Israelites faced extreme suffering, death, and exploitation at the hands of powerful invading armies from Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome. Their little slice of land happened to be a valuable overland trading route that no empire could resist.

Though God delivered the Israelites on many occasions, hardships and tragedies littered the history of the Israelites right up to the Roman military occupation of Israel. The only faint glimmer of post-exile hope came when Judas Maccabeus led a successful rebellion against the Greek rulers who had banned observance of the Jewish Law, killed many Jews, and even defiled the temple.

The Maccabees family established the fragile Hasmonean dynasty that was prone to intrigue and infighting. This fledgling state hardly realized the hopes spoken of in the prophets and must have proven a tremendous disappointment. In the midst of military victory and Jewish autonomy, God still did not return to his suffering people. Rather, internal fighting threatened the Hasmonean rule until the rising Roman Empire took over at the invitation of one Jewish party with designs on the throne. Herod

the Great eventually established himself as Rome's representative to rule the land of Israel, the very same Herod who met the magi, killed infants, and drowned relatives in his various swimming pools.

From the exile to the rule of Rome, Israel endured a series of crushing defeats, unimaginable oppression, and heartbreaking disappointments. The people of Israel longed for the return of God to the land, bringing them freedom, justice, and peace, while driving out and punishing their enemies. The Jewish people in the audience of John the Baptist and Jesus didn't just expect a messiah who would rule as king; they expected nothing less than the dramatic, world-changing return of God to rule as king.

Much has been written about the Pharisees who emerged after the exile as interpreters of Scripture and who tried to put Israel back on the right course after suffering such severe retribution for its sins. The wounds of the exile ran deep, leaving scars on these people, driving them to rigorous study of the Scriptures. They refused to make the same mistakes as their ancestors who rejected and even killed the prophets. In many ways, they heroically picked up the pieces and tried to move forward under trying circumstances.

If you distilled the mission of the Pharisees, you might say they had to prepare the people for God's coming—a return announced by the Messiah. They taught obedience to the law and looked forward to the Messiah's arrival as a result of obedience to that law. There is a tradition among Jews to this day that if every Jew keeps just one perfect Sabbath at the same time, the Messiah will come back. While we read about the Pharisees and Sadducees raking Jesus over the coals for his supposed violations of the Jewish Law, in the background, driving their exacting

theology and application, is their role in preparing the people for the return of God. They gave their lives to this work. They studied the law so they would receive the Messiah with open arms.

After years of waiting and studying the Scriptures, the religious leaders of Israel conspired to kill Jesus.

### **WHAT KEEPS US FROM FOLLOWING JESUS?**

The Gospels tell the kinds of stories that should keep us up at night. When the people who knew the Bible best couldn't recognize the coming of God in their midst, we have a kind of theological thriller that is quite terrifying for those committed to studying and obeying the Scriptures. When the disciples learned that the religious teachers of their day couldn't cut it in God's kingdom they asked, "Then who can be saved?" Can you feel the tension in that question? Even the disciples who spent every day with Jesus needed a lot of time and explanation before they figured out Jesus. If that's the case, then what makes us so sure we won't miss him too? Whether our expectations or sinful habits obstruct our view, there are plenty of ways to overlook Jesus.

We need to place ourselves in the shoes of Jesus' audience and figure out how he defied the expectations of his audience and follow that with the hard work of opening our lives to the Spirit of God. As we encounter Jesus and his unexpected challenges to our lives, let's ask the Spirit to convict, change, and renew us. In addition, we should pay particular attention to the kind of people Jesus sought out, those he called blessed, and those who received and clung to his message.

In other words, if we read the Gospels and find a Jesus who isn't all that demanding, challenging, or countercultural (a Jesus

who is merely a superior version of ourselves), then there's a good chance we aren't meeting the Jesus that the gospel writers had in mind. The audience of Jesus was often puzzled, challenged, or disturbed by his words and actions. What are the odds that we are more clever or knowledgeable than the Pharisees and teachers of the law? Could we desire God's Messiah more than people who lived under Roman oppression? While we have the advantage of the Holy Spirit among us, the Gospels remind us that it's very easy to miss Jesus. Finding him will take both careful thought and prayerful meditation on what God is teaching us.

This is a somewhat unconventional approach to discipleship. I'm suggesting that we look for the places in the Gospels where Jesus' listeners missed the point or found Jesus difficult to accept and that we contrast these unfollowers with faithful disciples.

Part of our task will be to slow down our readings of the Gospels and ponder the details, asking why Jesus challenged his original audience to rethink their religious customs, their expectations of the Messiah, and their approach to sinners. In a sense, we have become too familiar with the Gospels, overlooking events, sayings, and reactions that should give us pause. Keep in mind that John, the beloved disciple, said the world could not hold all of the books that could be written about all that Jesus said and did. Every single detail in the Gospels is crucial, demanding slow and careful readings.

Jesus told his followers:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and

in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Matt. 7:21–24)

There are two key lessons that we should keep in mind from this passage. First, Jesus made it very clear that some who claim him as their Lord and Savior don’t actually know him and will even be cast away as evildoers. Even with miracles and prophecies to their credit, they have missed out on knowing Jesus and living in righteous obedience to him. Second, in this passage, Jesus had been talking about trees bearing fruit and he would move on to describe a house built on a rock—both metaphors illustrate the importance of putting the words of Jesus into practice.

Jesus called his audience to move beyond merely understanding his words, calling him Lord, or even performing miracles. He was looking for people who would dig into his message, grasp its meaning, and then engage in the hard work of putting it into practice. Our comfort in our own culture and our familiarity with the story of Jesus can tame his message and rob us of the opportunity to encounter him and put his words into practice. In fact, if we don’t take the time to understand his message and to carefully put it into practice, he said we are foolish and can expect nothing from God.

There are consequences for missing Jesus, real consequences that demand a pause to evaluate our understanding of who Jesus really is and what he expects of us. However, if we can let Jesus disrupt the barriers that keep us from him, we will experience

the abundant life that he promised. The cost of failure is steep, but the rewards are beyond what we can imagine. Learning from the mistakes of those who ignored and rejected Jesus will require humility and faith that God's Spirit can guide his people to right belief and faithful practice. As we look at the ways Jesus' original audience missed him, I pray that our own lives will remain open to the promptings of God's Spirit so that we will be able to follow him faithfully today without hindrance.

Our journey begins with an unusual man who became the focal point of messianic hope at the time of Jesus. After a miraculous birth, his life calling became announcing the arrival of the Messiah. After pointing to Jesus, God himself confirmed that he had pointed out the right man as the Messiah. How this man ended up harboring doubts is the subject of our first story.

# **1 JOHN THE BAPTIST**

## **A MESSIAH NO ONE EXPECTED**

**I**n the spring of 1738, John Wesley returned to England after a failed ministry in the colony of Georgia. To say Wesley’s ministry “failed” understates his situation. His ministry had been a complete and utter fiasco that included a broken engagement, lawsuits, strife within his congregation, and failed outreach to the Native Americans. As his former fiancée’s new husband tried to drag him into court, Wesley could only hope to escape his pastoral post by jumping on a ship bound for England.

While searching for answers, Wesley began to spend time in Moravian meetings—a group that emphasized personal holiness and commitment to reading and practicing Scripture. At a Moravian

meeting in Aldersgate, Wesley felt his heart “strangely warmed” during an exposition of the book of Romans. In the years that followed, Wesley looked back at this moment as the turning point for his ministry. As he finally grasped the significance of salvation by faith, he found a true catalyst for life change and for his ministry. Wesley didn’t just revolutionize his personal approach to holy living and preaching; he founded small groups and commissioned preachers to carry this message throughout England and deep into the new American colonies. His orderly approach to holiness became known as Methodism, but you can see the growth of Wesley’s ministry in a wide variety of Christian denominations to this day.

We’ve all been “strangely warm” at times. Perhaps a fever knocks us out or we forget to turn down the heat at night. Why would anyone base an entire ministry on a moment that seems so arbitrary? Whatever God did to the heart of John Wesley, it served as confirmation that he needed to change his approach to God and his ministry among those around him. Perhaps he was so thirsty for any kind of experience of God that a warm heart was all he needed.

I have many friends who have shared similar experiences with Wesley. They’ve described the presence of God as a profound sense of peace, while others have literally wiped sweat off their brows from the “heat” of God’s presence. I haven’t personally felt the heat of God, but I have experienced the cleansing sorrow of repentance and indescribable joy when I had a kind of vision of God’s present kingdom in this world. It’s anyone’s guess why some people have these experiences and others don’t or why they differ so widely from one person to another. But the point is that God stepped into their lives at a particular moment

and gave them a sign they could hang onto before making a significant change. Wesley's experience of forgiveness and hope may not strike us as all that impressive in retrospect. We may even be a little bit skeptical. However, it was enough to spark new life in a discouraged preacher. When God needs to unveil his salvation to a discouraged nation, we shouldn't be surprised to find that he brings a whole lot more than some heat.

## **WOULD YOU TRUST AN ANGEL?**

### **The Angel Made Me Do It**

My own experiences of God's presence pale in comparison to the circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptist. John's father, Zechariah, wasn't just a respected priest. Due to a series of significant events, the people of his time recognized that God planned to do something extraordinary with Zechariah's family. As he and his wife, Elizabeth, prayed for a child into their old age, they watched their hopes fade with each passing year. But their future was about to dramatically change.

When Zechariah took his turn to serve at the temple, he drew the significant lot to burn incense behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies. This was important enough, but then an angel appeared to him, predicting that he and his wife would conceive a son and name him John. Best yet, John would carry the spirit and power of Elijah, preparing the people of Israel for the Lord. Even if Zechariah didn't believe the angel at first, his loss of speech until John's circumcision ceremony provided enough confirmation about the role of God that everyone in Judea began talking about this baby. By the time they completed the ceremony, John and his family became the talk of the town. This wasn't just notable

in and of itself because of the angel's appearance. The story of an elderly couple conceiving a child carried strong overtones from the story of Abraham and Sarah. Everyone would have noted it. What was God preparing to do with his people?

John's miraculous conception, angelic announcement, and father's long prophetic oracle about his ministry supercharged the anticipation of everyone in Judea. How would the spirit of Elijah manifest itself in this child? Would the Messiah come now? Is this child the Messiah? John grew up surrounded by these stories and subsequent speculation about God's plan for his life. His destiny had been handed to him from the start of his life: He would serve as the next Elijah.

Can you imagine the conversations that must have surrounded John at family events as he grew up? Friends and family must have told him over and over again about the angel appearing to his father, his mother's miraculous conception, and his father's nine months of silence followed by a long prophetic poem. I wonder if John felt so much pressure to become a prophet that he ran away to the desert to eat grasshoppers and honey.

Whatever John thought of this, Zechariah had foretold that John would be a prophet who declared the salvation of God's people—the end of the exile. In other words, John was in charge of preparing the way for the Messiah much like Elijah had prepared the way for Elisha. John not only moved into the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord, he also looked the part of Elijah with his simple camel hair wardrobe and fiery confrontation with Jewish leaders.

John knew from Isaiah that the place to prepare for God's coming was out in the wilderness. In fact, Rome's puppet rulers

were always on the lookout for messianic movements, so the wilderness made sense practically as well. The location of John's ministry would have called to mind the exodus experience of Israel—moving from the wilderness to the Promised Land through the Jordan River. The Jews of this time were reenacting the exodus by confessing their sins and undergoing baptism. They did this as a way to hasten God's return to Israel as the rightful king.

Baptism was typically reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism, so the implications of Jews undergoing a baptism of repentance symbolized a commitment to once again live as God's people. John structured his life so that he could live as a prophet—hearing from God, setting himself apart from the world, and living simply, lest anything crowd out God's voice. God spoke and then John set out with his message of hope that the time of suffering and exile was about to end.

At this point in the story, everything seemed to be lining up with everyone's expectations and the Scriptures. An Elijah appeared in the wilderness, and the people responded with repentance. Much like the prophets before him, John called the people to interact with one another justly, to right wrongs, and to remember that God could cut off his "chosen people" should they refuse to repent.

When Jesus arrived on the banks of the Jordan, John baptized him, and then God showed up with a thundering confirmation of Jesus and a dove descending upon him. Though many continued to follow John for years after the appearance of Jesus, John made it clear that Jesus must increase while he decreased. His mission was complete.

Or was it?

While everyone expected Jesus to bring the rule of God back to Israel and to end the exile, Jesus didn't challenge the pagan rulers as anticipated, and he regularly offended the Jewish religious leaders. No one could deny that Jesus had performed many miracles, but he refused to confirm that he was the Messiah either verbally or through a miraculous sign such as calling down fire from the heavens. Jesus always let his audience interpret his signs for themselves. What kind of a leader was this?

Though Jesus certainly helped many people and garnered wide-spread enthusiasm, he hadn't changed very much in Israel other than healing and feeding some people. But even those people whom Jesus fed continued in poverty as before, and the Roman rulers still defiled the land with their oppressive treatment of locals and their unwelcomed occupation of Israel. This was not the way anyone expected God to return. What was a prophet to do?

John believed very deeply that the Messiah would bring righteousness to the land, and he knew that the Messiah was present. Therefore, it's likely that he became bolder with his message. Besides calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of snakes, he also challenged the morality of King Herod. Herod responded by imprisoning John. As the days and months in prison dragged on, John hit a low point. Was he wrong about Jesus? Why would the Messiah leave him in prison without challenging the rulers and authorities? Had he baptized the wrong person?

### **When Doubts Distract Us from God**

Though John saw that the way to prepare for God's coming began in the wilderness, he didn't realize that Jesus would continue to work on the margins in the wilderness and in the relative

obscurity of Galilee. Though many came to see him, Jesus did not begin his ministry by directly challenging the rulers of his time. Nor did he immediately rush toward the cities to confront widespread injustice and abuse. When the authorities sought to kill Jesus, it wasn't because he was trying to take their jobs, but because he was initiating a completely different approach to God and power that undermined the existing order and threatened to stir the populace to revolt.

When John spoke of the coming Messiah, he used powerful apocalyptic language that described God's coming judgment of the ungodly: "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:16–17). John didn't see Jesus bringing about the kind of repentance and judgment you would expect during the day of the Lord.

Though Jesus spoke strongly on some occasions, his ministry was hardly the game changer that anyone expected. Instead of a winnowing fork, Jesus gave the people bread and fish. In fact, we might say that Jesus was a disappointment for John and his disciples. Later in the book of Acts, we read that John the Baptist still had followers throughout the Mediterranean region. It seems that while John announced the coming of the Messiah, many people didn't think Jesus was the right choice. As John sat in prison and listened for developments about Jesus, he harbored his own doubts.

When John sent some of his own disciples to ask Jesus about his doubts, he was given a characteristic response from Jesus:

When the men [John’s disciples] came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’” At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: 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.” (Luke 7:20–23)

Rather than receiving a straight yes or no from Jesus, John was forced to rethink his concept of what exactly a messiah is and does. While Jesus performed miracles and healed many people, John was looking for him to usher in the visible rule of God and to bring judgment on the ungodly. He wanted to see fire come down from heaven and consume the unfruitful trees that so pervasively littered God’s forest. Instead, Jesus defined the coming of God’s kingdom as preaching the good news to the poor, healing the sick, and raising the dead. God was beginning to repair the world’s brokenness from the bottom up, but the people who had set themselves apart by observing the law were expecting more.

John didn’t see how a real messiah could have so much power and yet hold it back. Didn’t Jesus see the injustice and afflictions brought on the people of Israel? Wasn’t he disgusted by the rampant immorality of their Jewish “king,” Herod? Didn’t Jesus have the ability to radically change the corrupt rulers of the land? What happened to the fire and the winnowing fork?

Even more perplexing for John may have been the way the angel's prediction for his life had played out. Wasn't he supposed to have "the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17)? The spirit and the power behind Elijah sustained him in a widow's home, along a desert stream, and on a wind-swept mountain. When Ahab and Jezebel threatened Elijah's life, God intervened and saved him. If Herod stood for the new Ahab, and John was fulfilling the role of Elijah, didn't it make sense for him to speak out against his wickedness? And if Jesus was the Messiah, why wasn't he intervening to bring about God's salvation to him and the rest of the people in Israel?

While we have no concrete evidence that John stopped believing Jesus was the Messiah, we also don't know how John responded to the message from Jesus. The last we hear of John is that he had some doubts to work through about Jesus. Soon after that, Herod executed John for criticizing his wife and his illicit marriage to her. Such an end to the story of John is chilling. A story that begins with such hope in the deliverance of God ends in tragedy and despair.

Here was the man set apart from his conception to announce the return of God. From his childhood on through adulthood John had the confirmation of his calling in place from both an angel and his father's prophecy. In response to a direct message from God, he journeyed into the wilderness to begin announcing the return of God. If anyone had a reason for confidence in finding the Messiah, it was John—that was the calling for his entire life. That he came so close to unfollowing Jesus should warn us against thinking we could never miss the work of God among us today.

## **WHAT DO WE EXPECT FROM JESUS?**

While we hope for the best in John's story, we don't know whether he ever made sense of his calling and the work of Jesus. He had a miraculous birth, an angel's prediction, and a prophecy from his father, and yet Jesus still left him uncertain. There were plenty of others in the Gospels who wrestled with the same things as John. Jesus' own mother struggled to accept her Son's calling, even trying to stop his ministry because she and his brothers suspected he'd lost his mind. Thankfully, we learn that Mary was among the followers of Jesus in the upper room during Pentecost. She eventually came around to believe the incredible truth that her Son was actually the Messiah.

Even with angelic visions and prophecies, the people closest to Jesus struggled to believe. This trend suggests that no matter how "close" we may think we are to Jesus, we can still run the risk of missing him.

### **Believing in the Wrong "Jesus"**

The life of John reminds us that Jesus can surprise even the most prepared person. Once we begin to attach expectations and assumptions to Jesus, we may place ourselves in a position to miss him. It's easy to impose our own expectations upon Jesus, creating different portraits where he's an ideal business man, a gentle pushover, or a tough, macho man.

Each portrait of Jesus picks up on a different element of his story, inflates it, and covers up the more complex features of Jesus and his ministry. Businessman Jesus turns Jesus into a shrewd manager of people and resources who skillfully builds an effective inner circle of followers. The gentle Jesus welcomes all, holds back on judgment, and bestows unlimited grace and

patience on sinners who are never empowered to change. Macho Jesus gets tough on his opponents, thrashes bad theology, and warns his audience of God's coming wrath.

Just as John made assumptions based both on Scripture and expectations circulating at his time, we also construct pictures of who Jesus is, what he does, and how we should respond to him based on the snippets of Jesus' story that resonate with our preferences. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus ran into expectations and categories that he continuously challenged or subverted. He met expectations in part, but he also pursued different directions than his audience anticipated.

Jesus certainly came with a kind of winnowing fork and fire, but he didn't bring the kind of final judgment his audience expected. He came to bring salvation, to expose the hearts of many, and to eventually baptize his followers with fire and the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. He inaugurated the kingdom of God, but he started from the bottom, in the margins, and in obscurity. His kingdom was like slow-moving yeast working its way through bread dough.

Besides missing Jesus, it's also easy to miss what Jesus wants to accomplish in our lives. John didn't expect his ministry to end in a dank prison cell. Many of the expected outcomes for John's ministry never materialized. We can fall into the same trap for ourselves. Successful Christians supposedly have large churches, political influence, or spiritually victorious lives. We forget that sometimes God works through slow-moving, bottom-up means, even when there's an ongoing struggle with sin or a lack of outward signs of progress. Incredible growth may happen at times, but God's standards rarely become standardized. Faithfulness to God's calling often looks quite different than we expect.

Perhaps God has called us to minister in obscurity or in the margins. Perhaps taking a stand for Christ requires stepping back from the public spotlight and serving among those who cannot raise our profiles in a particular job or in a particular neighborhood. When we become attached to a particular portrait of Jesus, a particular way that ministry needs to happen, or particular goals that we expect, then we may end up rejecting the work God is doing around us, missing out on the blessings and joys he wants to pour on us. As we seek to know Jesus, we need to balance what we know of him with what we still need to discover. We balance our certainty with the expectation that God can always bring fresh insights to us.

### **How Jesus Changed My Picture of Himself**

When I started attending seminary, I wanted nothing more than to become a church-planting pastor, imagining that God could only use me in a leadership capacity on the staff of a church. When I finally joined a church part-time, I quickly realized that God had not called me into that kind of ministry. For two years, I tried to make it work, but there was no escaping the fact that God had different plans.

I spent four years fighting God about his plans for my life after graduating from seminary. One night a friend prayed over me that God was preparing me for “something” and just the thought of having a calling was more than I could bear. I craved it in my time of uncertainty and wandering. I doubled over weeping as I confessed my expectations and stubbornness. I had been trying to cram God’s plans for me into my own definitions of success. Over the following years, God brought me to a place of accepting his plans and expectations for my life. Although your

experiences with and expectations of God are not necessarily the same as mine, I think many of us can relate to John the Baptist as he looked at Jesus and thought to himself, “This is not what I had in mind.”

There are men and women today trying to make the best of difficult situations at work or in particular neighborhoods because they believe God has to use them in that particular place. They become attached to their goals and expected outcomes without realizing that God may have something different in mind. Some may be working in a church and need to get out. Some may need to give up on their careers to embrace a specific calling in a Christian ministry. Some may need to commit themselves to their secular jobs to be faithful to God. Some may need to accept staying put, while others need to break out of a rut and dream of something new. A close friend of mine and his wife discovered that God was actually calling them to minister in their hometown back in the United States rather than serving on the mission field.

Finding the way of Jesus isn't always easy. Sometimes God has to realign our expectations according to his plans before he can use us in ways that bring blessings to others, as well as ourselves.

### **PERSEVERANCE ISN'T ABOUT WHERE WE START**

Sometimes we just want a sign that things are going to work out and that we're on the right track. Will I find God's calling for my life? Will I be a good parent? Will I reach all of my career goals? Will I stay faithful to God until the end? John had a word of assurance for his life. God's plan was spread out before him, and he still struggled to follow it. Perhaps we need to be careful what we wish for.

While a powerful prophecy or moment of conversion can jumpstart us and send us on the right path toward God, persevering has never been about starting well. John Wesley didn't rely on his warm heart to sustain himself throughout his ministry. He cultivated spiritual practices and met with Christians who could help keep him accountable each week. His expectations hindered his ability to see Jesus as the Messiah. The same could be true for us. If we aren't cultivating spiritual practices that enable us to hear God speak today, we may end up looking for God in the wrong places.

Jesus had many surprises in store for his audience in the Gospels and has plenty more for us in the present. If John the Baptist was the most likely person to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, then perhaps the people of Nazareth who knew Jesus best were the second most likely. Sadly, their response to Jesus moved far beyond uncertainty or doubt.