

# Followers of the Way

## What do we do when God is silent?

**Philip Quenby 20-11-22**

**Matthew 11:1-19**

How wonderful it is when God speaks! When He quickens His Word to us so Scriptures seems to leap off the page. When he drops a thought into our minds, directs our attention to things in our lives we need to work on, brings people to us He'd like us to help, or lovingly challenges the condition of our hearts. When He releases words of knowledge or prophecy that speak directly into situations we or others face. When He displays His power in healing or driving out demons. Times like that are sweet, like water to our thirsty souls. We thank the LORD that He's a prayer-answering God, who doesn't turn His face away from the world He created, but is deeply and intimately concerned about it and about each creature He has made. He loves us, He's for us, and He wants the best for us. It grieves Him if we suffer, and wounds Him when we fail to return His love. He experiences emotions as we do, yet with an intensity we can't imagine. When God saw the condition of humanity before the Flood, the Bible says, "his heart was filled with pain." (Genesis 6:6).

God made us for relationship with Him. He wants to fellowship with us, for us to spend time together so we can get to know Him – to start work now on growing towards our glorious future with Him in heaven, when "[we] shall know fully, even as [we] are fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12).

We have to be honest, though. Life isn't always like that. There are seasons when it seems prayers aren't answered. When our hearts feel dry and we can no longer pray. Times when God seems distant or silent. We've experienced decades in which the collective walk of faith in this nation has too often looked like constant retreat, and talk of victory to come has had a distinctly hollow ring to it. We wouldn't be human if at some point these seasons didn't wear us down and cause us to wonder what we're doing wrong. If you've ever felt like that – and I wonder if there are any of us who've never felt that way! – we're in the best of company. Today we're going to look at living through the low points, as individuals, Church and nation, and coming out the other side into that place of joy and victory God has prepared for us.

Jesus' cousin John the Baptist burst on the scene in first century AD Judea at what in human terms was an unpromising time. The nation was under the rule of Roman client kings – first Herod the Great, then his three sons – who paid lip service to the God of Israel but were prepared to do whatever they thought necessary to maintain their own power. Herod the Great had his wife and three of his sons murdered since he believed they were a threat to him, and later showed no compunction about ordering the mass killing of boys in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18). His remaining sons' crimes weren't quite that bad, but

they were chips off the old block nevertheless. And behind them was the iron fist of Rome, ready to crush anyone who stood in its way. Millions are thought to have died in the Jewish revolts of AD 66-70 and AD 135, which the legions put down with incredible ferocity.

And worse, there was a famine of the Word of God, as Amos had predicted over seven hundred years before: "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.'" (Amos 8:11). Roughly four centuries passed between the last prophetic word given by Malachi and the coming of John the Baptist. They're often referred to as the Four Hundred Years of Silence. It was a dark night of the soul for the nation, as the four hundred years of captivity in Egypt had been for earlier generations.

During these long years of waiting for the promised Messiah, much Jewish religious observance had gone down the blind alley represented by the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus described the Pharisees as "whitewashed tombs" (Matthew 23:27), and "blind guides ... [who] strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." (Matthew 23:24). They were often characterised by legalism, while the Sadducees were fatally compromised by their pursuit of political power and didn't believe in resurrection. On the fringes, groups like the Zealots put their efforts into political or military resistance to Rome.

But then, emerging as if from nowhere, came John the Baptist, "filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth" (Luke 1:15), preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3) and leading "many of the people of Israel ... back to the Lord their God" (Luke 1:16). The Bible is clear that "this is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:2-4, Luke 3:4-6). Later, Jesus also linked John with Malachi's prophecy, saying, "This is the one about whom it is written, 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way before you.'" (Matthew 11:10) and Jesus continued, "if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come." (Matthew 11:14, referencing Malachi 4:5-6)). John was the archetype of an anointed man of God, greatly honoured by Jesus when he told the listening crowd, "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11). John spoke with Holy Spirit courage and power when he challenged the religious establishment (Matthew 3:7), the people (Luke 3:7-9) and the political elite (Luke 3:19). He prophesied the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 3:11-12, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:16-17) and identified Jesus as the Anointed One (Matthew 3:14, John 1:29-34). He was a forerunner of Christ himself, a man who "exhorted the people and preached the good news to them." (Luke 3:18).

John was someone who knew the power of God. He heard the Word of God. He had the privilege of baptising the Messiah, "one whose sandals I am not fit to carry" (Matthew 3:3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16). Jesus attested to his character. He was steadfast, not "a reed swayed by the wind" (Matthew 11:7). He was incorruptible, not "dressed in fine clothes ... [or living] in kings' palaces" (Matthew 11:8). He was bold and courageous, calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7) to their face. He was straight-

talking and practical, giving simple, easy-to-understand advice to help people lead better lives (Luke 3:11-14). He had a tender heart to “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6).

Yet even John had a season of doubt and despair. For “when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch [one of Herod the Great’s sons] because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.” (Luke 3:19-20). And so, we see John, languishing in gaol, questioning whether he’d been mistaken or somehow got it wrong: “When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’” (Matthew 11:2, see also Luke 7:18-35). At this point, John clearly wasn’t being kept in the very closest confinement, as he was still able to talk to his disciples, and receive news from them of what was going on in the outside world. But either he hadn’t been told the full story, or what he heard didn’t chime with what he’d expected the Messiah to be. At all events, he needed reassurance. In response, Jesus provided what reads almost like a checklist of the Messianic mandate he’d (half) quoted in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:17-19):

The blind receive sight (Matthew 11:5) and “recovery of sight for the blind” (Luke 4:18) = “the eyes of the blind [will] be opened” (Isaiah 35:5)

The lame walk (Matthew 11:5) = “the lame [will] leap like a deer” (Isaiah 35:6)

Those who have leprosy are cured (Matthew 11:5) = “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean” (Ezekiel 36:25)

The deaf hear (Matthew 11:5) = “the ears of the deaf [will] be unstopped” (Isaiah 35:5)

The dead are raised (Matthew 11:5) = “Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.” (Ezekiel 37:13)

The good news is preached to the poor (Matthew 11:5) = “the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Isaiah 61:1)

A biblically literate Jew like John the Baptist could hardly have failed to get the message. But just to underscore the point, Jesus added, “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me” (Matthew 11:6) and then, “As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John.” (Matthew 11:7). This was done while John’s disciples were still in earshot – deliberately, so they’d hear and report to John what Jesus said. We’re not told John’s reaction, but there’s no reason to think he was anything other than overjoyed to know that God’s promises were being so miraculously fulfilled, and heartened by what Jesus said about him. The Scriptures say nothing more about John, other than recording his beheading on the orders of Herod the tetrarch (Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6:14-29). Having faithfully discharged his task of preparing the way for Jesus, and having borne in his body the suffering that was so often the fate of prophets down

the ages, he was gathered to his heavenly reward. And how great that reward must be, since there are none who've "risen ... greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11).

There's no shame in admitting that we've had or are going through times of discouragement, doubt and even despair. These are common human experiences, and even the Bible's very best role models were no strangers to them. Not only John the Baptist, but also Elijah when he fled in fear from the vengeance of Jezebel (1 Kings 19:3) and hid in a cave on Horeb (1 Kings 19:9). He'd bravely confronted 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), yet suddenly his courage failed him. Even Jesus on the cross cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1) – though it's important to recognise that, by quoting the first line of Psalm 22, He was intending to refer us to the whole of it, and this Psalm's initial expression of questioning abandonment gives way in later verses to a triumphal proclamation of praise and assurance. Be that as it may, we can be sure Christ experienced all we do in this respect, and more.

Yet just as we can say Jesus loves us as we are but loves us too much to leave us that way, so we can say that, while God doesn't blame us for what we feel, that doesn't mean He wants us to stay in dark places. It's a question of what we do with the hand we've been dealt and of allowing ourselves to let God show us His perspective. This has lessons for us in our personal walk, and it also speaks into the position of the Body of Christ as a whole. Especially so, in this in-between time in which we live, when it feels like there's been a long famine of the Word of God in our own land, when we crave the much-delayed move of God that has been prayed for and prayed for, but still hasn't come.

We may think we're on a hiding to nothing, society's going to the dogs, and we should just keep our heads down. But it was ever thus, and our forefathers stayed the course, so why shouldn't we? As Jesus said, "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners'" (Matthew 11:16-19). Solomon observed that there's nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9) and in the eyes of those who stand against God, we're damned if we do and damned if we don't, but that's their problem, not ours. Our responsibility is to perform the tasks God's allotted to us right here and now.

John the Baptist didn't choose to enter a dark place. He was thrown into a dungeon on the orders of a tyrannical ruler, yet even so, he couldn't help but be affected by his environment. By contrast, Elijah didn't have to go into a dank cave, but he sought it out as a place of refuge. He went back to Horeb, where Moses had received the Ten Commandments – so overcome by fear, isolation and a sense of being abandoned that he persuaded himself this was a sensible option, full of nostalgia for the past, looking for the earthquake, wind and fire God had displayed in the good old days. Well, the good old days have been and gone, and they're not going to return. As the saying goes, *Normal isn't*

*coming back – Jesus is!* The LORD's doing a new thing, and we'll need new wineskins to hold the outpouring of His Spirit in these latter days, not old ones.

This is an unpromising time in our national life, and across the globe, we see things moving at great speed towards the terrible end-time events the Bible foretells. In many places at home and abroad, Satan's client kings seem to be enthroned, doing the best they can to make hay while the sun shines. There's been a prolonged famine of the Word of God in our land, not helped by the tendency of too many traditional Church denominations and ministries to go down blind alleys. The remnant church has continued to stand, and has shown character like John the Baptist – steadfast, upright, bold and courageous, straight-talking, practical and tender hearted. But I suspect today she finds herself in a dark place, wondering what it's all about and what it's all for. If that's where we are, there can be a temptation to take refuge in nostalgia, to look back to a time when things seemed better. In truth, there's no such things as a golden age. This isn't the time to look for the old. It's a moment to stand at the mouth of the cave and receive God's re-commissioning for this day and hour: a commission to crown and to anoint (1 Kings 19:15-16), to "uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10), to "worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness" (Psalm 29:2).

The message and practice of the Gospel doesn't and shouldn't conform to what the world wants or expects, as Matthew 11:16-19 shows. The Messianic mandate is the same it ever was, and "wisdom is proved right by her actions." (Matthew 11:16-19). When Jesus said, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Matthew 11:6), that was for all believers, for all time. As the Body of Christ, we're called in this present age to manifest the kingdom of God in our homes, families, workplaces and neighbourhoods – whatever the surrounding circumstances may be and however dark the skies may seem. Although "all the Prophets and the Law prophesied [about the coming Messiah] until John" (Matthew 11:12-13), now the Saviour and Redeemer has come, and so "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it." (Matthew 11:12-13). It's time as never before to lay forceful hold of the kingdom.

Be encouraged. Government's a mess, organised religion's a mess, and Satan's seemingly having a field day – but God! Whether we're in a dark place through force of circumstances or our own choice, don't stay shut in and shut out. It's important we allow God to release His encouragement and re-envisioning to us. The best way to counter doubt, despair and disappointment is through the evidence of what we "hear and see" (Matthew 11:4) – not what we hear from the world's propagandists or see on our television screens, but what we hear and see of God's activity, as reported by godly and reliable people. Bear in mind, too, that sometimes God stays silent precisely so we can learn He's still with us even at such times. His promise is never to leave us or forsake us, and His promises are sure and true.