

The bigwigs from Jerusalem went down to the river to investigate John the Baptist and they asked him, **“Who are you?”** John’s answer was very strange. He said, **“I am not the Christ.”** *Isn’t that a funny way to respond?* It’d be like if someone said, **“Who are you?”** and you said, **“I’m not the president of the united states.”** They asked, **“Who are you?”** and he answered, **“I am not the Christ.”** We can deduce from John’s response that there were some people who thought he might be the Christ.

John was the forerunner anointed by God to prepare the people for the coming of the Christ, but he is very clear from the outset saying of himself, **“I am not the Christ.”** In fact, much of John’s ministry was about demonstrating who he was not. He is not the light. He is not the Christ. He is not Elijah. He is not the Prophet. He is not worthy to untie the Christ’s sandals. It is a wise individual who can accurately describe what he or she is not.

If he were hungry for honor and adulation, this would have been the perfect opportunity for John to promote himself. The Scriptures tell us that John was already extremely popular with common folk. All of Judea was flocking out to see him and be baptized. His sermons were impressive and rumors were circulating that this man was special.

The people of Israel during the Second Temple period, the period during which the Gospels were written, were deeply tuned in to the promises of a coming Liberator, one like Moses, who would bring liberty to captives and good tidings to the poor. There was a strong sense of expectation in the atmosphere. Around the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, there were numerous charismatic figures attracting followers and promising change. There were wonderworkers claiming to bring healing and deliverance from devils. There were messianic political agitators gaining traction in their campaigns to upset the tyranny of the Roman occupiers.

It was John’s role in those turbulent times to call men to repentance, to point out that our sins have alienated us from our Creator and that all of us are in desperate need of reconciliation.

The best time to hear about a Liberator is when you are in prison. You are never more receptive to the promise of freedom than when you are a slave. Most of us will never know the feeling of being bound by chains of iron but there is more than one form of bondage. It is easier to bend metal bars than to set yourself free from incarceration by lust or selfishness or malice. Nothing locks you down as firmly as guilt.

As the heirs of Adam’s rebellion, all of us are enslaved not only by sin but by the decay of death. Death is the fruit of sin. Not only the deaths of our bodies, but the brutal corruption of every aspect of human existence. In other words, life on earth is not the garden of delights it was meant to be.

It is a sign of wisdom when a person begins to know the world for the cruel merciless place it is. And this awakening, if not understood within the context of Christian hope, is devastating. The crushing realization that you won’t achieve most of your goals; you won’t realize most of the things you hope for; mothers don’t really love their sons; people are essentially selfish and the world basically does not care. These are the realizations that drive men to seek some sense of relief in drugs or alcohol or illicit sexual encounters, in gambling and addictions and shirking one’s duties through excessive escapist entertainments.

No sentient creature is so polluted that it does not know the difference between bondage and freedom. A fox caught in a steel jaw will chew off his leg to get away. Even men who have never heard the gospel message of forgiveness and eternal life hope for a better day. It is the instinctual will to survive. We need to be saved from the darkening powers which crowd us if we are to live.

For several weeks or months, we’ve been preparing for Christmas. For many of us, that means spending money we don’t have as much in the spirit of consumption as in the spirit of giving. Very soon, we’ll all be

gathered around the trees in our living rooms exchanging gifts, drinking eggnog, taking pictures while ooh-ing and aah-ing over clothing and trinkets and gadgets we don't need and will never use. Then the excitement will be over and for many of us there will be a sense of letdown as we go back to our routines with renewed awareness that our families are imperfect, there is no peace on earth nor goodwill toward men.

Christmas is a time when many Americans feel nostalgic for a simpler day. Coca-Cola advertisements set in the 1940s and 50s show Santa Claus bringing presents to children whose faces are lit with innocent joy. The implication is that those were better days but it's a false misleading dream. What is better for some is worse for others. There was never a time in since the fall of such carefree happiness.

Nostalgia is a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former time. A bittersweet longing for the way things never were but should have been. Interestingly, the Greek root for the word "**nostalgia**" means "**to return home.**" In general usage, nostalgia looks to the past, but at an even more basic level, I think we are nostalgic for something yet to come.

The Christian never feels truly at home in this world. We are always strangers in a strange land, pilgrims journeying to a better destination. There are many signposts along the way telling us that we are getting closer to our destination. There are signs that we are nearing the closing of this age. And by God's mercy, there are frequent indications of the beauty and glory of that future home.

Everything in this world that can be called good is a glimpse of something better. Music that makes you tap your toe, strong coffee on a cold morning, being hugged unexpectedly, the savory goodness of ham, sweet potatoes and stuffing, the inviting comfort of a soft bed, being entranced by a well told story, seeing your son's face light up when you bring him a present, the loyal companionship of a dog. All those things are just the tip of the iceberg. They are merely shadows of something more substantial on its way. C.S. Lewis once wrote that the wholesome delights of this life "**are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.**"

John the Baptist lived to point us to the Christ, the one and only answer for our bewilderment. Jesus is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. There is never a recorded incident in the four Gospels of Jesus ever turning a sinner away. There is never a recorded incident of Jesus refusing a sincere plea for healing, for deliverance or for redemption. Nor will he turn you away. Nor will he refuse your plea.

Examine yourselves according to the Ten Commandments as you have been taught. Look in the mirror of God's Law to see yourself as you truly are. *Have you loved God above all things? Have you neglected His Word? Have you honored authority? Have you helped your neighbor in all of his needs? Have you lusted or coveted for what God has not given?*

God has seen your situation. He has heard your sobbing. And He has done something about it. The unique eternal Son of God has stepped down from his majestic throne to enter our world as one of us. And he has miraculously taken upon himself the guilt of our sin. Upon the cross hung the vilest, most repulsive scoundrel that has ever lived. Upon the cross hung the most perverted adulterer, the vilest offender, the most sadistic murderer of them all, Jesus Christ. He had no sin of his own but he took upon himself the full guilt of the sin of all, a scene so repugnant that even the sun turned dark, the earth shook and God cursed Him. All this Jesus did willingly out of supreme love for you. The Father's wrath has been extinguished. The righteous anger of God was exhausted upon the Son so that we who are in Christ might be pardoned and cleansed, justified and set free from all condemnation.

So come to the Lord's table of celebration to receive the very antidote to death. And sing, for in truth the Lord Jesus is coming again to take us up out of this vale of tears to dwell with him in glory forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.