

# The Call of God—a Daily Bible Guide

## Leap of Faith 2015—Week 3

This document is from the Greater Boston Vineyard and has been edited for Charlottesville Vineyard. There may be some things that are written for their community, but that you can translate for ours.

Monday, March 9

Read Luke 1:26-38

### Points of Interest

- ‘In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy’—Elizabeth is Mary's much older cousin. Elizabeth, like Sarah and Hannah (Samuel's mother) before her, is supernaturally pregnant after having no children until her child-bearing years had seemingly past.
- ‘a town in Galilee’—Galilee is a region in northern Roman Palestine, with a mixed Jewish and non-Jewish population. Among the Jews of the time, Judea, which is the region surrounding Jerusalem, is the cool place to live; Galilee is considered a backwater.
- ‘a descendant of David’—David's family had fallen on tough times the past 500 years or so. The Davidic kings were deposed by the Babylonians in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. David's family must have held some influence for a while, because the Persians appointed at least one descendant of David as governor of Judah. But it had been at least a couple of hundred years, maybe as much as 500, since someone in David's lineage had held any position of national authority. Still, David would probably make the list of top 5 most famous Jews of all history; he's one of the handful of people with whom God had established a personal covenant. So, being descended from him probably still held some cache.
- ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you’—this reminds me a lot of the angel's greeting of Gideon (February 28<sup>th</sup>'s passage, Judges 6). There, the angel called a weakling and a coward ‘Mighty Warrior.’ Here, the angel calls a young, unmarried woman from the boonies, ‘Extraordinarily Special One.’ I think the key to both of these surprising greetings is what comes with them: ‘The Lord is with you.’ Again and again in these passages, people have been called to missions far beyond their capacity:
  - Noah the landlubber to build an ocean liner and fill it with representatives of all living things;
  - Moses the stutterer to speak to Pharaoh and the whole Israelite people;
  - Gideon the coward to chase the marauders away;
  - And now this unknown girl to restore the Davidic monarchy.

Somehow, the fact that it's completely beyond their abilities is not even a factor for God. God sees something in each of them that makes God want to work with them, to form these special partnerships known as covenants. Whenever they say, ‘I don't think I can afford it.’ God responds, ‘That's okay. I'll cover the difference.’

- ‘You will conceive and give birth to a son’—God really outdoes himself here. When Moses said that he's not a good talker, God responded: ‘I made the tongue. Don't you think I can help you out there?’ But giving a virgin the ability to have a baby (while remaining a virgin) increases the level of difficulty significantly, to my mind.
- ‘he will reign over the house of Jacob forever’—God had promised David that his dynasty would last forever (2 Samuel 7:16). It didn't seem to quite work out that way. Within two generations, David's descendants had lost control of most of their kingdom in the Israelite civil war. Later, as I describe above, they lost the rest of it to the Babylonians. God shows here that he hasn't forgotten that promise, and he has a way of making it happen. This new, divine king will re-establish David's throne, and keep on ruling forever. He'll make David's kingdom what it was always meant to be.
- ‘How will this be’—the angel's greeting may be fairly similar, but Mary's response feels quite different from Gideon's. Instead of Gideon's skepticism and peevishness, Mary seems to have genuine curiosity: ‘Really? I want to see how you pull this off.’
- ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you’—the Holy Spirit breathed life into the world. The Holy Spirit made the cowardly Gideon into a warrior. The Holy Spirit turned pretty boy David into a king. And now, the Holy Spirit is turning a virgin into a virgin mother.
- ‘she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month’—Elizabeth's pregnancy is a stepping-stone sign for Mary. It's a big jump to think that God can make a virgin pregnant. Knowing that someone past child-bearing years is narrows the distance.

- ‘no word from God will ever fail’—again, this relies on God’s promises, his goodness, and his power, not on anything else.
- ‘May it be to me according to your word’—this sounds nice, but she’s actually signing up for something very difficult. Not everyone is going to believe that she’s a virgin made pregnant by the power of God. To most, she’ll look like another unwed, teenage mother. That’s not exactly a glorious role.

## Taking It Home

- *For you:* Does the Holy Spirit impregnating Mary give you a little more faith that through the Holy Spirit, really anything is possible? Ask God today for more of his Holy Spirit. Tell God that you want more of his presence. Ask him to empower you this week.
- *For your five:* Just like Elizabeth’s pregnancy in old age was a stepping-stone sign that helped Mary believe in what God wanted to do, pray that God would give your five similar stepping-stone signs. Pray that he would give them specific answers to prayer that would help them believe all of the things that God is offering to them.
- *For our church:* Pray that the Holy Spirit would come upon our church in stronger and more powerful ways than ever before, and that impossibly great things would happen as a result. Pray that our church would be known as a place of supernatural power and healing for anyone who would come.

**Tuesday, March 10**

**Read Luke 2:21-40**

## Points of Interest

- ‘the purification rites required by the Law of Moses’—Leviticus 12 gives instructions for the proper rituals to thank God for a new child. The mother has to wait seven days after birth to do the rituals.
- ‘to offer a sacrifice’—we’ve seen this concept of sacrificing an animal a few times. Perhaps it bears some explaining. The sacrificial system is sort of like a sacred backyard barbecue party. The worshipper, a priest, and God have a little dinner together, to celebrate the good news. Some parts of the animal are offered to God (by being burned in the fire), some are eaten by the priest, and some by the worshipper.
- ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons’—this means Mary and Joseph are poor. According to Leviticus 12, you give a pair of birds if you can’t afford a lamb.
- ‘waiting for the consolation of Israel’—our old friend Isaiah promised that, even though Israel would go through hard times, they would eventually be comforted (Isaiah 40:1-2). Simeon has a sense that they haven’t yet received their full portion of comfort.
- ‘he would not die before’—Simeon’s destiny is to see with his own eyes God begin an entire new chapter in his plan for the world.
- ‘the Lord’s Messiah’—*Messiah* means, ‘anointed.’ As we’ve seen (e.g. David in 1 Samuel 16, an earlier passage), anointing is a ceremony in which God commissions and equips someone for a specific purpose; oil is poured over the person’s head as a symbol of both the calling and the empowering. Over time, the students of the prophets realized that, while many people were anointed for this or that purpose, God had one very special person—The Anointed, with a capital, ‘A’—who would inaugurate God’s biggest purposes in the world. Simeon recognizes the baby Jesus as this Anointed One.
- ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles’—Simeon sings out in joy that what he has been awaiting has finally happened. His song is a variation on Isaiah 49, our passage from last Friday:

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,  
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

- ‘a sword will pierce your own soul too’—wonderful things will happen, but they still won’t be easy. The awkward pregnancy is over, she’s now married, and perhaps with time Mary’s reputation as the girl who got herself pregnant will fade away. But the hard part is just beginning. She will have to watch all of the difficult things her miracle-son will face.
- ‘She was very old’—Luke isn’t kidding. It’s a little unclear whether she’s 84 years old, or been a widow for 84 years. Either way, she’s no spring chicken, as they say. Simeon and Anna have waited a long time to see God’s promises fulfilled in their lifetime.
- ‘at that very moment’—Simeon and Anna are a tag-team. Just as Simeon ends, Anna begins, speaking about the destiny of the child in front of them, and the good news it is for everyone.
- ‘to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem’—this reminds me of Isaiah 6 (last Thursday’s passage): ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding.’ Anna is, of course, speaking to everyone within hearing

range, but not everyone cares or pays attention. Only the people who are looking forward to Jerusalem's destiny being reclaimed catch what Anna is saying.

- 'they returned to Galilee'—after this full day of amazing blessings and thought-provoking prophecies, they settle back into normal life for a while.

### Taking it home

- *For you:* What are the things you are waiting for? How are you feeling about the waiting? Have you forgotten what you are waiting for? Have you lost hope? Or are you angry that you're still waiting? Tell God the ways you are frustrated or discouraged in the waiting process. Ask God to give you the diligence, faithfulness, and joy that Anna and Simeon had as they waited until they saw what God promised. Ask God to encourage you, give you wisdom, and remind you about what and why you are waiting.
- *For your five:* Anna could see the potential in this baby Jesus to bring about the people's deepest longings. Pray that Jesus would similarly meet the deep longings of your five. Ask God to send Anna figures into their lives, who would be able to point out how that might be possible.
- *For our church:* Ask God to fill our church with people like Anna and Simeon who are faithfully committed for the long-term to seeing what God has promised to do in Charlottesville. Just like Anna and Simeon staked out ground in the temple, pray that God would fill our church and our city with long-term residents who are expectantly but patiently waiting for God's best for our city.

### Wednesday, March 11

#### Read Mark 1: 1-14

#### Points of Interest

- 'as it is written in Isaiah the prophet'—this is actually a medley from Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1).
- 'John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness'—John the Baptist is Jesus' cousin, Elizabeth's son from Monday's passage.
- 'a baptism of repentance'—baptism is a ritual cleansing involving full immersion in water. Before John, baptism was part of the ceremony for non-Jews to convert to Judaism. But John is asking Jews to be baptized; essentially, he's saying that these Jews need to become Jews. *Repent* means, 'turn again,' or, 'recalibrate.' Somehow, John's listeners have gotten off track.
- 'The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem'—despite the severity of John's message, he gets a good crowd. The big city and the suburbs empty out, as everyone goes out into the wilderness to hear John. John's message resonates with the people. They believe that they do, in fact, need to recalibrate. Perhaps they, like Mark, recognize him as the Messiah's advance man, mentioned by Isaiah and Malachi.
- 'John wore clothing made of camel's hair'—John is wearing the uniform of a prophet. In fact, he seems to be consciously imitating Elijah. He lives in the desert, as Elijah did much of the time, and he dresses just like Elijah:

The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?"

They replied, "He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist."

The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite." (2 Kings 1:8)

- 'After me comes the one more powerful'—John's calling is an interesting one. His role is extremely important, but also completely dependent. He shows an intriguing combination of self-confidence and humility. There's only one person more powerful than he. But that one is very much more powerful; John isn't even qualified to be his slave.
- 'he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit'—John uses water, but this one to come will immerse people in the very presence of God.
- 'heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove'—this is Jesus' anointing. No oil is involved at all. But the Spirit rips through the sky and flies right to him.
- 'You are my Son, whom I love'—Jesus' calling is different in scale to the other callings we've seen: he's The Anointed One, filled with the Spirit, God's very own Son. But it's not different in kind. Just like everyone else, Jesus hears the voice of God, responds, and is equipped for the task. The rules aren't different for him because he's divine. He needs to hear God, and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. I wonder whether or not Jesus knew of his identity, and his destiny, before this moment.
- 'the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness'—this is an unexpected turn. The Spirit doesn't lead him to Jerusalem, to establish his kingdom, but out into the wilderness instead.
- 'The time has come'—John's message is, 'Wait for it. Wait for it.' Jesus' message is, 'Now's the time.'

- ‘has come near’—God’s kingdom, the way things are supposed to be, is near. The ‘near’ here refers not to time (‘The kingdom could come any time.’) but to proximity (‘The kingdom is within reach.’).
- ‘Repent and believe the good news’—John speaks of repentance. Jesus speaks of both repentance and belief. He’s calling people not just to recalibrate, but then to move forward in the right direction.

### Taking It Home

- *For you:* If Jesus himself relied on hearing God’s voice, I imagine that we’ll need to continue to work on hearing from God as well. Spend some time today trying to hear from God. Ask God for wisdom, or for a course of action for the week ahead. Try bringing to God a specific troubling situation or event and asking God what you should do about it.
- *For your five:* Pray that God would protect your five in any ways that they are in a place of wilderness. If your five have at one point experienced God but now seemed distant and unsure of whether that experience was true, pray that God’s presence would guide them.
- *For our church:* Pray that God’s kingdom—the way things are supposed to be—would in fact come to Charlottesville. Pray that God would make Charlottesville a region of love, peace, unity, prosperity, healing, and joy for everyone. Pray specifically for God’s provision for the homeless and for others on the fringe of society who are often overlooked. Pray that they would experience good things from God.

### Thursday, March 12

#### Read Mark 1: 16-20, 29-34

#### Points of Interest

- ‘Come, follow me’—God tells Noah his entire plan to flood the earth at the outset. Abraham is told from the very beginning that he would be the father of a multitude. Moses knows he’s supposed to free the Israelites from the Egyptians, and Gideon knows from the get-go that he is commissioned to chase the Midianites away. Andrew, Simon, James, and John, on the other hand, are just called to take the first step. They’re told to follow, but not where they’re going.
- ‘I will send you out to fish for people’—Jesus doesn’t merely call them to leave fishing behind. They move from one kind of fishing to another. In one way, it’s a rejection of their past; in another, it’s a reclaiming and enhancement of it. Also, we see by this that, while their exact path is unclear, Jesus isn’t calling these people to just meander; he has a particular destination in mind for them.
- ‘At once’—there’s no negotiation, cajoling or multiple rounds of signs necessary here. They get up and go.
- ‘they left their nets’—they’re fishermen, and they leave their nets. James and John are the sons of Zebedee. They are each dropping what most defines them. This isn’t just a change of jobs; it’s a change of identity.
- ‘they left their father Zebedee in the boat’—leaving family behind has become something of a theme in our reading. Gideon’s career starts with destroying his father’s Asherah pole. Elisha kills his oxen to make clear he’s never coming back to the farm. And James and John don’t even give Zebedee the chance to get out of the boat before they leave. Following God’s call doesn’t seem to combine well with life as it has always been.
- ‘Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever’—there’s something of leaving family behind in responding to God’s call, and there’s something of bringing God’s power into your family. Simon is going to be leaving home to follow Jesus, but before he goes, Jesus supernaturally heals one of his family members.

### Taking It Home

- *For you:* How do you feel about Jesus’ words, “come, follow me”? Does the prospect of following Jesus without being entirely sure of where you are going or what it might entail bother you or seem daunting? Are you tempted to think that Noah, Moses and Gideon, who got specific mandates from God, got the better end of the deal? What are the reasons that make you want a clear picture of where you are going? Try telling God that you trust where he is leading you and that you want to follow. Ask God to show you the first steps you can take towards him even if the final destination isn’t clearly mapped out.
- *For your five:* Ask God to use the skills, backgrounds and experiences of your five in really unique and meaningful ways, and that they would play an integral part of what he is doing in the world. Ask God to give a deeper sense of purpose and meaning to your five’s professions, just like he did for Andrew and Simon.
- *For our church:* Pray that our church would be a place where families thrive and where all members of a family could come and powerfully encounter God in amazing ways. Pray for all families today in Charlottesville, asking God to protect and bless them. Ask that our church could play a meaningful part in seeing families all across Charlottesville thrive.

**Friday, March 13**  
**Read Matthew 9:9-13**

**Points of Interest**

- ‘sitting at the tax collector's booth’—tax collectors are extremely unpopular, in first century Jewish territories even more than usual. The taxes are being collected for the Romans, an unpopular foreign government. And, the tax collectors would be given broad powers and have a tendency to abuse them, by extorting more money out of the people than taxes would require. Perhaps the closest thing we would be familiar with would be a mob's protection racket: people are forced to pay more than they can afford, in order to save themselves from the threat of even bigger trouble.
- ‘Matthew got up and followed him’—Matthew immediately leaves his life behind to follow Jesus, just like the fishermen. His decision is a little different from the other four. He's probably hoping to leave behind a bad reputation—but he's also leaving a lot of cash on the table.
- ‘having dinner at Matthew's house’—Matthew makes the momentous decision to leave his tax collecting behind to follow Jesus. The first place they go is . . . his place, for dinner. The same thing happened for Simon as well, with a brief stop at the synagogue on the way. One thing Jesus is clearly calling them into is relationship. He wants to get to know his followers, and their families, and their friends.
- ‘tax collectors and sinners’—the tax collectors are a part of a larger group called, ‘The Sinners.’ These are outcasts, some by choice, some not, often because of profession, sometimes because of religious tradition, sometimes because of the scruples of society. They are people who wouldn't be welcome in decent society. So, they don't even try to be decent; instead, they hang out with one another, partying. It includes people you would expect at a mob lord's house (which is basically what Matthew's house is), like thieves and prostitutes. It might also include some groups we might find surprising, like undertakers and leatherworkers, who, because their profession required touching dead bodies, would hardly ever be allowed at synagogue; so they go over to Matthew's house instead.
- ‘When the Pharisees saw this’—the law referred to here is the religious law, the Law of Moses. The Pharisees are pretty much the opposite of the Sinners. If the Sinners have decided to basically ignore religious standards of decency, the Pharisees are hyperaware and quite rigid about them.
- ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’—Jesus is quoting Hosea, one of the biblical prophets (Hosea 6:6). The Pharisees are scrupulous about some things they find in the Bible (rituals, like offering sacrifices), but completely overlook other things (character qualities, like mercy). According to Hosea—and Jesus—they have their priorities backward.
- ‘I have not come to call the righteous’—up until now, we've mostly paid attention to what people are called to accomplish. Jesus adds here a new element to this idea of calling. Apparently, the calling isn't only for the sake of the mission; it's also for our sakes. The call is a call to the doctor's office. We're sick with sin, and we follow Jesus because he can bring us to health. That means that only those people who are willing to be called ‘sick’—those willing to admit they have a problem, in support group language—will be able to truly embrace their calling.

**Taking It Home**

- *For you:* Do you feel like you have it all together? Do you spend a lot of time trying to have it all together, and feel a lot of pressure that you should? Consider that God might not be asking you to do this. What would it look like to embrace the idea of being sick and needing the help of a doctor to get better? Does that go against every instinct you have? Take a moment to tell God the ways that you don't actually have it all together. Tell God that you need him and want to look to him for your life to go well.
- *For your five:* Pray for your five's family and friends. What do you know about them and how is your five's relationship with them? How might you invest in what God is doing in your five by investing in their friends and families? Pray for opportunities to spend time with them just like Jesus spent time with the friends and families of his followers.
- *For our church:* Pray that God would guard us from becoming irrelevant and closed off to everyone except the super-pious. Pray that God would use our church to welcome people who generally feel removed from God and unwelcomed in church. Pick a group who you would never imagine being inside a church and connecting with God. Pray for that group, asking God to bless them and increase the ways he is already working in their lives. Pray that our church could somehow be a part of loving those people well on God's behalf.

**Saturday, March 14**  
**Read John 3:1-16**

**Points of Interest**

- ‘Now there was a Pharisee’—not all of the Pharisees are immune to Jesus’ call. Nicodemus is a rather high-ranking Pharisee, but he’s willing to admit that Jesus is from God, and has something to offer.
- ‘a member of the Jewish ruling council’—the Jews are under Roman rule, but are allowed a certain amount of autonomy. This council is sort of like a state assembly.
- ‘He came to Jesus at night’—apparently it’s not cool among Nicodemus’ friends to be seen with Jesus. Nicodemus is interested enough to come to him, but only at night when no one will see.
- ‘How can anyone be born when they are old’—I have a feeling that Nicodemus could figure out that Jesus is speaking metaphorically if he really wanted to. Rather than not getting it, I think he objects to it. He’s willing to seek Jesus out. He’s even humble enough to call Jesus, ‘Rabbi.’ But he’s not willing to be called a child. He’s an old man, with a distinguished career. He’s a scholar and a politician. And Jesus is saying that he hasn’t even been born yet. What Jesus is saying sounds like a step backward to Nicodemus.
- ‘without being born of water and the Spirit’—I sometimes have trouble following the exact meaning of Jesus’ imagery in the gospel of John. I don’t know if the ‘water’ being referred to here is John the Baptist’s baptism or amniotic fluid. I am fairly sure, though, that being born of water is an earthly birth, and being born of the Spirit is a heavenly birth. Just like you start life in this world by being born into it, you start eternal life by being born into heaven.
- ‘do you not understand these things?’—Jesus is dismayed by the task in front of him. If even the teachers don’t understand such a—to him—basic concept, what does that mean for the people they teach?
- ‘we speak of what we know’—as in a couple of other instances over the course of this guide, we have a sudden shift to a plural pronoun. In this instance, I think ‘we’ refers to people who are born of the Spirit. To people who aren’t born of the Spirit, the life of the spirit, like the wind, is something of a mystery. They know it exists, but they don’t know quite how it works. Jesus actually knows the spiritual life well, from the inside, and he’s trying to explain it to Nicodemus; but Nicodemus likes his own half-formed theories better.
- ‘the Son of Man’—this is Jesus’ favorite title for himself. It’s sort of a riddle. He could just be calling himself ‘Everyman’; what man isn’t a son of a man? But he also seems to be alluding to a popular prophecy about the Messiah:

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. <sup>14</sup>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)

- ‘Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness’—Jesus is referencing sort of a crazy story here. It can be found in Numbers 21:4-9. As you’ll recall, God and Moses together rescued the Israelites from oppressive slavery in Egypt, just as the Israelites had asked. God wanted to bring them pretty much directly into the land he had promised Abraham, but the Israelites didn’t want to go there (they were afraid of the residents); so they wandered around the desert instead. Every day they were in the desert, God miraculously provided them with food and water. But all the Israelites ever did was complain: ‘We loved Egypt. Why’d you ever make us leave? And this food you give us stinks. Why do you treat us so badly?’ At one point, God lost his patience, and said, ‘Oh, yeah. You think I treat you badly. I’ll show you bad treatment,’ and he infested their camp with poisonous snakes. God told Moses to sculpt a bronze snake and hang it from a pole. Whoever looked up to the bronze snake would live; whoever didn’t would die of the poison. The point seems to be that looking down at your problems will only lead to death, but looking up toward God will rescue you from them.
- ‘so the Son of Man must be lifted up’—Jesus is going to be raised up just like that bronze snake. Jesus is playing a little with the phrase ‘lifted up.’ He’s using it figuratively, as in ‘given a raise,’ ‘promoted,’ ‘exalted.’ But he’s also foreshadowing the fact that he will literally be lifted up on to a piece of wood, just like the bronze snake.

## Taking It Home

- *For you:* What are the problems you find yourself in currently that make you want to grumble? Try to give up complaining about those things for the day. When those problems and circumstances persist and you are tempted to grumble like the Israelites did, try shifting your focus up to God and ask him to rescue you from them.
- *For your five:* Pray for your five in ways that they are like Nicodemus: recognizing Jesus has something to offer them, but still skeptical, and not pleased by what it will require from them. Pray that God would give your five the courage to step where they feel a little unsure and the humility for to sacrifice something (like Nicodemus did his reputation as a teacher) to get what God has for them.
- *For our church:* Ask God to give our church more understanding of and more trust in who Jesus is. Pray that we wouldn’t be like Nicodemus and rely on our own half-formed theories of how God works. Jesus offers himself to everyone and yet, we see that it’s pretty easy to miss what he is actually saying. Pray that God would help us know

Jesus better, be bold to trust him, and have faith in counterintuitive ways that he works.

## Sunday, March 15

### Read Matthew 11:2-6. 14: 1-12

#### Points of Interest

- ‘John heard in prison’—this is John the Baptist again, not John the disciple and gospel writer. Just like with his hero, Elijah, John’s work gets him into trouble with the authorities. He doesn’t, like Elijah, escape. John’s life is completely out of his control, and in the hands of an unstable king. How will he respond to that lack of control?
- ‘Are you the one who was to come’—when Jesus came to John to be baptized, John was pretty sure that Jesus is the one that he’d been talking about (see Matthew 3:13-15). Now, his confidence is shaken. If Jesus is the Savior he announced, why isn’t he saving him from prison?
- ‘the good news is proclaimed to the poor’—Jesus is kind of quoting Isaiah 61:1 here. I say ‘kind of’ because Jesus makes a very intriguing change. Here’s Isaiah 61:1:

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 . . .

In his version, Jesus replaces the lines about prisoners being freed with lines about the sick being healed. By this change, Jesus deftly communicates to John that he is indeed ‘the one who was to come,’ and that the reality of his coming is a little different from what John expected. He is, in fact, using God’s power to bring supernatural goodness into the lives of people who are hurting or lacking; but he’s not going to be breaking John out of jail.

- ‘Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me’—on the one hand, John has fulfilled his destiny: he ushered in a spiritual revival to welcome the long-awaited Messiah. On the other hand, he’s stuck in prison. These two things are both facts. Which fact will he let define how he measures his life?
- ‘Herod the tetrarch’—*tetrarch* means ‘quarter-king.’ Herod’s father, Herod the Great, ruled all of Judah and Galilee and much of the surrounding area as well. When he died, the Romans didn’t trust any of his sons with that level of responsibility. They took some of Herod the Great’s realm directly under their control, and then split the rest among four of his sons.
- ‘because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife’—Herodias is Herod’s niece, as well as his wife, and sister-in-law. Now, what could John the Baptist possibly say was wrong with that?
- ‘he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked’—this isn’t even an oath that Herod could really back up. He’s only a quarter of a puppet king, held on a tight leash by the Romans. He’s lucky that his grand-niece/niece/step-daughter asks him for something he can actually give. It seems that kings like being grandiose, even when—perhaps especially when—they can’t afford it.
- ‘had John beheaded’—this is totally unfair. This wicked, crazy family simply goes on with their lives, but John, the godly prophet and the opening act for the Messiah, has his head cut off.

#### Taking it Home

- *For you:* How are you feeling about your current place in life? Is it where you thought you’d be, or are your current circumstances different from what you pictured? I can imagine that being imprisoned wasn’t quite how John pictured his life going. At one point God was doing all sorts of amazing things through him, but now he is imprisoned and isn’t even sure if Jesus is who he thought he was. Are there ways that you feel like you used to be closer to God than you are now? Or are there ways your current circumstances make you question your experience of and belief in God all together? Ask God for wisdom in making sense of this. Ask him to show you his perspective.
- *For your five:* Do your five feel left out of what God is doing? Do you think your five can resonate with John the Baptist, where there are miracles happening for everyone else but he is stuck in prison and not quite sure if God’s power will reach him? Pray that God would show up for your five in supernatural ways. Tell God any ways you feel the pressure to try to prove him to your five, and ask God to do the work instead.
- *For our church:* John the Baptist helped people recognize the changes they needed to make in their lives. Ask God to guide us through the same process, showing us ways that we too need to recalibrate.