



SAINTS & SCOUNDRELS

IN THE STORY OF JESUS

NANCY GUTHRIE

“How grateful I am to God for Nancy Guthrie’s new book and personal Bible study, *Saints and Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus*! This is the book that I will put in the hands of all my women friends, from the not-yet believer to the seasoned saint. Unfolding like a drama, this book presents in clear light the people with whom Jesus lived and interacted (mostly) during his earthly ministry. Like a mirror, this book beckons the reader to behold herself in the reflected light of how real people interacted with the real and the resurrected Jesus. The exposure from this reflection would be awful if Nancy was not such a faithful guide, reminding us at every turn that repentance is the way forward and that what humbles you can never hurt you. *Saints and Scoundrels* is convicting and comforting at once, reminding all true believers that God’s family is rough around the edges and held together by grace and blood and faith and the King of kings and Lord of lords who makes himself lowly and gentle for the salvation of his people. The clarion call of the gospel life rings loud and true in this book. Oh, what a Savior! Oh, what a book!”

Rosaria Butterfield, Former Professor of English, Syracuse University;
author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

“I have a deep appreciation for Nancy Guthrie’s ability to commend the wonders of grace with such wonderful prose, and this book is no exception. *Saints and Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus* is a brilliant ‘rogues’ gallery’ of redemption with a heart-stirring focus on the Saint who came unabashedly for scoundrels like you and me. Read and be refreshed again in the gospel.”

Jared C. Wilson, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry, Spurgeon College; Author in Residence, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *The Imperfect Disciple*

“If you have ever felt that the Bible belongs to another world, you must read this book. Nancy Guthrie’s compelling cameos will draw you into the lives of people whose interactions with Jesus are surprisingly like our own. These characters will speak directly to the realities of your life, giving you a fresh glimpse of all that can be yours in Jesus Christ. Get ready to see yourself in the scoundrels and, by God’s grace, become more like the saints.”

Colin S. Smith, Senior Pastor, The Orchard, Arlington Heights, Illinois;
author, *Heaven, How I Got Here* and *Heaven, So Near—So Far*

“Nancy Guthrie rightly sees Christ in all of Scripture. Even in the details of biblical accounts, *Saints and Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus* points to the overarching story of the one who transforms sinners. Gather some friends and get drawn into the stories to see the impact Jesus had on the lives of hypocrites, crooks, and criminals. You might just find yourself mirrored in the characters, and your heart will be stirred as you come to know Christ better.”

Keri Folmar, Director of Women’s Ministries, United Christian Church of Dubai; author, *The Good Portion: Scripture*

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NANCY GUTHRIE

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This book is affectionately dedicated to the women of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church in Franklin, Tennessee. Some Sundays I look around the room, and I'm moved to tears by the great gift I've been given of godly women to walk with through this life of faith. Each week we come together to confess our scoundrel ways and are assured of forgiveness. We partake of a feast of God's word and the feast of the bread and the cup, and we head out into the world as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2).

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Jesus includes all kinds of characters—a second cousin who recognized him, parents who loved him, disciples who misunderstood him, fastidious law-keepers who tried to trap him, a friend who betrayed him, priests who plotted against him, and followers who died for him. While some embraced him, others hated him. While some wanted to serve him, others wanted to use him. Some who claimed to be saints proved to be scoundrels. And some who began as scoundrels were transformed into saints.

For some of us, many of these characters are still stuck on a Sunday school felt board. We formed our understanding of who they were and the part they played in the story of Jesus long ago, perhaps in childhood, and have never come to see them in a fuller light, as more complex human beings. Others of us don't have a childhood background of Sunday school stories that have shaped our understanding of these various characters. We're more of a blank slate. Or, if not completely blank, perhaps we have some significant gaps. We're still trying to make sense of the story of Jesus in terms of why he came, what his message was and is, why he was loved by some and hated by others, and why he remains such a polarizing figure even today.

I hope to add to, deepen, refine, or perhaps correct your grasp of the various people I feature in the following chapters. I hope to show them to you from an angle you may not have seen before or at least to show them through a more intense lens than you may

have previously examined them. I hope you'll come to see them in a fuller dimension in terms of their human frailty and limitations as well as their confidence and courage. I hope to show you some of the things that may have shaped their expectations, motivations, and misunderstandings. I hope you'll see some of yourself in them, at times. But mostly, I want to help you to see Jesus more clearly through delving into these stories and these people. Over and over again, we'll see how Jesus interacted with people—people with hopes, dreams, hurts, and disappointments. We'll hear what Jesus said to those who welcomed him and wanted him, as well as to those who rejected him and ridiculed him. We'll also get a sense of what Jesus wants from us and what he offers to us.

All this will take us deep into our Bibles, especially into the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—as well as into the book of Acts, as the story of Jesus continues even after his death and resurrection. To give you a solid foundation for getting the most out of each chapter, you may want to spend some time reading the Bible passages each chapter is based on before you read the chapter. To help you with this, I've created a Personal Bible Study to go along with this book that you can do on your own or work through with a group. You'll find it, along with other resources connected to this book, at www.nancyguthrie.com.

It was my own curiosity about some of these characters, my own questions about why they did the things they did and said the things they said—and for some, died the way they died—that made me want to explore their stories. Again and again, I've seen pieces of myself in them—my fears, my failures, and my desires. But more importantly, they've helped me to love and admire Christ more, to become more convinced of his goodness, and to live more fully anticipating all he has promised to share with those who take hold of him by faith. I'm praying that the study of these characters will do the same for you—that these saints and scoundrels will point you clearly and convincingly to the only hope for saints and scoundrels: Jesus Christ.

THE VOICE

Recently, people all over the world stopped whatever they were doing to watch something happening on the outskirts of London—the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markel. As they tuned in to the ceremony at St. George’s Chapel in Windsor, they heard the words of a preacher. Here’s a snippet of what that preacher had to say:

Someone once said that Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in human history. A movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world, and a movement mandating people to live that love, and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself. We must discover love—the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world, a new world.¹

Rev. Michael Curry was convinced that what the world needs is love and that love has the power to change the world. And a roar of approval for his message rose up all over the world. Curry’s sermon amassed forty thousand tweets per minute, many praising the reverend’s address as the standout moment from the ceremony for its style and substance.

When we begin reading at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we hear another kind of preacher preach: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight'" (Matt. 3:3). This was the preacher everyone was talking about back in his day. He was the one people traveled from their homes and cities to hear, which was surprising when you consider his message. Matthew 3:2 summarizes the content of this preacher's message this way: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." At the heart of this preacher's message to the people of his day was that they were wrong and had to change. There had to be a radical reordering of their lives. Why? Because the King was coming. This preacher called the most religious people in town a "brood of vipers," warning them, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3:10). *Well, that's not very nice!* He warned: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12). *Well, that would be unpleasant!*

I don't think those guests at the recent royal wedding would have appreciated this preacher's message nearly as much as they did Michael Curry's message, do you? This preacher, whom we know as John the Baptist, was convinced that what the world needs is repentance—a turning from self and sin toward God and grace.

But let's be honest. This idea that we need to repent because judgment is coming reminds us of the cartoons we've seen with a guy on a street corner in a robe and long beard carrying a sign that says, "Repent, the end is near!" It strikes us as unnecessarily alarmist and rather ridiculous. So many of us have settled comfortably into a status quo lifestyle that would be incredibly inconvenient to disrupt. This is why it is so hard for us to significantly change our diets, for example. The suggestion that we go from enjoying our French toast and french fries and fried rice and start

the Keto diet makes our stomachs growl. To give up our old device and adjust to the latest technology sometimes makes us want to hold on to the familiar version a little longer. To make a significant change in the way we interact with our boss, our coworkers, our customers, our in-laws, or our neighbors can seem like a whole lot more effort than we want to expend.

So let's look at the man, John the Baptist, and his challenging call away from the status quo, his call to everyone within the sound of his voice to turn around and go another direction from the way their whole lives have been heading. Let's look at his mission, his message, and the misunderstanding he had about Jesus. As we trace his story through the Gospels, we'll witness many who responded to his call to repentance. We'll see many who rejected his call and sought to silence him. We'll also meet a man and his wife (two scoundrels) who finally succeeded in silencing "the voice."

John's Mission

To understand John the Baptist and his mission, we simply can't begin with his miraculous conception. We have to understand that for centuries, the people of God had been watching and waiting for someone who would announce the coming of the promised Messiah. For centuries, when the scrolls of Isaiah were opened, God's people would work their way through the first thirty-nine chapters of promised judgment and then turn a corner at chapter 40 to hear:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD'S hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isa. 40:1–5)

Ah, when were things going to change? When would the glory of God be revealed in what seemed to them to be a God-forsaken land? When a voice would begin crying out, calling God’s people to prepare for the coming of the divine King.

Isaiah’s words draw upon the imagery of a king coming to a city. A bevy of workers would go out before the king to make sure the roads were passable for him and that the people were prepared to celebrate his arrival.

It wasn’t just the prophet Isaiah who wrote about this voice. Years later, God spoke through the prophet Malachi, saying, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 3:1). But as the book of Malachi continues, the experience of the coming of this King to his people, this Lord to his temple, doesn’t exactly sound warm and fuzzy for everyone involved. It doesn’t exactly look like the “happily ever after” of every Disney movie about princes and princesses:

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear

my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 4:1-3)

So “evildoers will be stubble.” *Ouch*. “Set ablaze.” *Ouch*. This passage says that for those who fear God’s name, there will be healing and leaping for joy, but for those who have hated rather than loved God’s law, the coming of the King will bring ruin. It seems rather black and white, doesn’t it?

In the final verses of the Old Testament in Malachi 4:5-6, we read: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

Consider how the Old Testament began in Genesis 1 with the words over and over again, that God blessed . . . God blessed . . . God blessed. What a contrast from these final verses of the Old Testament. The Old Testament ends not with a blessing, but with a curse, the threat of utter destruction. But there was also hope. God was going to send someone before that “great and awesome day of the LORD.” That someone would do a work of turning that would change the way people relate to each other. He would have a message that would confront the status quo, a message that would truly change the world.

But after God spoke through his prophet, Malachi, there was silence for four hundred years. People listened for the voice Isaiah wrote about, and they watched for this messenger Malachi wrote about. Then, finally, an angel appeared to an elderly priest as he carried out his duties in the Holy Place of the temple.

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have

joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:13–17)

Zechariah knew his Bible. The connection between the angel's words on that day and Malachi's four-hundred-years-ago words must have been obvious to him. The silence was going to be broken. The King was going to come. This son of Zechariah's was going to have a divine mission. He was going to be the voice crying into the wilderness of the world, calling people to get their hearts ready to receive their King!

John's Method

The story of the voice takes a leap forward in Matthew 3.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.'" (Matt. 3:1–3)

Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, was helping his Jewish readers make the connection between John the Baptist and the person Isaiah and Malachi had promised would come. He wrote:

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. (Matt. 3:4)

What's this about? Why did Matthew include this detail about John's location, wardrobe, and diet? "We're meant to see that John is cut from the same cloth (literally) as the Old Testament prophet, most notably Elijah."² John dressed in a way that was similar to Elijah. We're told in 2 Kings 1:8 that Elijah the Tishbite, "wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." John the Baptist wore a coat of camel's hair and a leather belt. During the drought, Elijah lived on stale bread dropped by ravens; John the Baptist spent most of his time in the desert eating locusts and wild honey.

Elijah was a prophet in the days when the king of Israel was actually seeking favor from Beelzebub, the false god of Ekron, instead of the one true God of Israel. His message to the king in his day was, "Now therefore thus says the LORD, you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die" (2 Kings 1:4). Not exactly a prophetic ray of sunshine!

Like Elijah, John the Baptist also had a challenging message for the people of his day, yet crowds headed out into the wilderness to hear him.

Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matt. 3:5–6)

Try to picture this scene. This wasn't everybody heading downtown to hear his or her favorite band. This was everybody leaving the comforts of towns and cities to go out into the wilderness where there were no fast-food offerings, very little water, no bathrooms, and no conveniences. The cities were emptying out, and people were heading into the dry desert. And why were they going? After four hundred years, God had broken his silence and was speaking through the final Old Testament prophet, John. He was out there saying that the day they had been waiting for, the salvation they had been waiting for, the restoration of Israel they had been waiting for, was finally coming!

But John's message also had a bite to it. To be ready for this salvation would require a deep shift in their lives, a costly shift away from the status quo.

John was out there boldly calling God's people to get honest about their sin and confess it. He was calling them to turn away from the sin they had grown comfortable with and set the course of their lives in a radically new direction. He was calling out their hard-heartedness toward God and each other—their presumptions of God's favor based on their bloodline and their prejudice against those who weren't from the "right" bloodline. He was calling them away from empty religiosity to a fuller devotion, away from legalism to love for God's law. He was calling them to turn away from their lack of care and compassion for their aging parents and growing children and instead to turn toward a tender-hearted, big-hearted way of relating to them.

Repentance is never a general thing. Real repentance always requires getting painfully specific regarding sins that we mourn over and turn away from. Someone who occasionally or weekly says, "Forgive us our sins," but never gets specific with God about the jealousy, the greed, the pride that has had a grip on his or her heart that week is not genuinely repentant. But as specific as repentance must be, there is something broader to it. Michael Horton writes,

Repentance is not modifying a few convictions here and there, but realizing that your whole interpretation of reality—God, yourself, your relation to God and the world—is misguided. It is not finding your way back to the "straight-and-narrow," after wandering off the beaten path a bit, but acknowledging before God that you are not—and never have been—even in the vicinity. You saw yourself at the center of the universe, but now you realize that you exist for God's pleasure and glory, and that changes how you look at everything. The right to determine for yourself what you believe and how you will live is surrendered.³

Imagine the men and women wading into the water and listing out loud their sins—their adultery, their hatred, their cruelty, their apathy toward God, their rebellion against God. As they confessed their sins, wanting to come clean and remain clean, they followed John into the waters of baptism, which symbolized the washing away of sins. Baptism wasn't new to these people. Baptism was one of the rituals that Gentiles who wanted to embrace Judaism went through. But these weren't Gentiles that John was baptizing. They were Jews. In calling them into the Jordan to be baptized, John was suggesting to these Jews that they were lost sinners, in need of salvation. Imagine the humility that John's baptism required of a Jew. By this act, she was confessing the inadequacy of her religious heritage to save her from her sins. She was placing herself on the same (lower) level, the same kingdom-outsider status, as a Gentile.

The Jordan was the river her forefathers crossed to enter into the promised land. She and her neighbors were going back into it because they found themselves on the brink of a new era for the people of God, and they wanted to be all in. They didn't want to miss it. They wanted to be washed and waiting for their King's arrival.

But it was not just those who were willing to repent who were going out to hear what John had to say.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."
(Matt. 3:7–10)

These Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious elite of their day, weren't coming to be baptized; they came to observe and condemn the baptism John was performing there. They had worked hard

to convince their Jewish followers that simply being Jewish and keeping the law (as they interpreted it) was sufficient to make them acceptable to God. John's ministry and message—and now, this baptism of his—suggested otherwise.

Real repentance doesn't come naturally, even to—and perhaps especially to—religious people. It takes a great deal of humility to say, "I've been wrong. I've been going in the wrong direction, and now, with all the strength God gives me, I intend to go in the opposite direction—toward dependence instead of independence, toward living to please God instead of just using God, toward humble obedience instead of prideful resistance." Repentance is not just a tweak. It's not a slight adjustment on the compass. It is a full turn that proves itself to be genuine by the fruit that is borne in a person's life.

There was no repentance and, therefore, no fruit of genuine repentance in the lives of the presumptuous, hypocritical religious elite who came out to the wilderness to condemn John. So John asked them, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). He was prompting them to remember the verses they had learned in Sabbath school. Their answer should have been: "The prophet Isaiah." It was Isaiah who had used the imagery of axes being laid at the foot of trees to warn God's people of his coming wrath:

Behold, the Lord GOD of hosts
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down,
and the lofty will be brought low.
He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,
and Lebanon will fall by the Majestic One. (Isa. 10:33–34)

It was Isaiah who wrote about being thrown into the fire:

And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men
who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die,

their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. (Isa. 66:24)

It was rigid and prideful resistance to repentance that made these religious leaders vulnerable to God's wrath. But they didn't see themselves as vulnerable to this judgment; they saw themselves as protected from this judgment. They were like many people today who are so busy with church activities, or people who went through a religious ritual in their childhood who are confident that they're "in," even though there is no fruit of genuine repentance and faith in their lives.

And I just have to stop to ask: Are you vulnerable? Is there fruit of genuine repentance in your life? The fruit of repentance from bitterness in the form of forgiveness? The fruit of repentance from greed in the form of increasing generosity? The fruit of repentance from self-centeredness in the form of being more concerned about the needs and hurts of others than about your own needs and hurts? Has there been a radical reorientation in your life that has put Christ at the center and not just at the fringes?

While John's baptism was meaningful, he knew that it was not everything God's people needed. It was merely preparatory for something that only the King he came to herald could provide. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11).

John knew that his outward baptism was merely symbolic of an inner cleansing. There was one coming who could accomplish that inner cleansing with a purifying fire, one coming who could make spiritually dead people alive. His water baptism was simply a symbol; the Spirit's baptism would be the reality that the symbol pointed toward.

But then, someone came to be baptized by John who needed no cleansing, no repentance:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt. 3:13–17)

Why would Jesus come to John to be baptized? And what did he mean that this act was “fitting . . . to fulfill all righteousness”? Evidently, there was something Jesus and John had to do in order to fulfill the plan of God, and part of that plan was brought about by Jesus receiving John’s baptism.

In the Old Testament, baptism was a form of consecration. When a priest reached the age of entry to public ministry at age thirty, he was baptized, set apart. So in his baptism, Jesus was being consecrated for service. Of course, at the heart of Jesus’s service to God was his identification with God’s people. He had taken on flesh and entered into the world, and now he was wading into the waters of baptism to step even further into identifying with us and our need—our need for cleansing from sin, and ultimately, our need for someone to bear the punishment for our sin. It was as he approached John for baptism that John recognized that was exactly who Jesus was. We read in John 1,

He saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” (John 1:29–31)

There at the Jordan, John recognized Jesus as the sin-bearer, the Lamb who would be slain. There in the Jordan, as Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism, Jesus was revealed, not only to John, but to all who heard the voice of God himself from heaven identifying Jesus as his Son, as the King who came to usher in God's kingdom, as the servant God spoke about through the prophet Isaiah when he wrote:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights [*in whom I am well pleased*];
I have put my Spirit upon him [*visibly*];
he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa. 42:1)

Surely John made the connection between God's words spoken from heaven at Jesus's baptism and this passage in Isaiah 42. Jesus would be the one who would "bring forth justice." That's what John and so many others were counting on. Finally, the King had come who would put an end to the tyranny and oppression brought upon Israel by so many foreign powers.

But then, as Jesus began his ministry in Galilee preaching on a hillside, multiplying fish and bread, and healing people with diseases, John didn't see Jesus bringing forth justice. In fact, a short time later, John found himself languishing in prison under a ruler who was thoroughly corrupt and cruel. Jesus didn't seem to be living up to what John understood from the Scriptures that the Christ would be and do. Jesus wasn't living up to John's expectations. Some of us know just what that's like. But unlike some of us, who perhaps become angry or alienated from Jesus when he doesn't do what we expect him to do, John went straight to Jesus with his questions.

John's Misunderstanding

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt. 11:2-3)

John's problem with Jesus was not one rooted in unbelief or emotional frailty under pressure. John's concern was based on the fact that from his vantage point, Jesus did not seem to be fulfilling the Scriptures. From his many years spent out in the wilderness, living and breathing the Old Testament scriptures, John had seen clearly that when the Christ came, he would set things right in the world. He would punish wrong and reward right. John's message to the people of his day—based on the Scriptures—had been that the “axe is laid to the root of the trees,” but he was hearing reports of Jesus cleansing a leper, healing a centurion's servant, and casting demons out of man. Imagine the evil things this man with a demon must have done in his community that deserved judgment, not mercy. John began to wonder: *Where is the axe, and when is Jesus going to start swinging it?*

There was something in the Old Testament scriptures that was not clear to John, something that created a misunderstanding as he waited in prison for the winnowing fork to begin gathering the chaff to set it on fire. John the Baptist, like most of the prophets and like so many people of his day, did not understand that the Christ would come twice: the first time to proclaim his kingdom and die as a once-for-all sacrifice for sinners, and the second time to establish his kingdom and destroy his enemies. John was expecting everything promised by the prophets of the Old Testament to take place in one monumental day of the Lord in his first coming.

And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Matt. 11:4–6)

Jesus knew that John's doubts were based on his understanding of the Scripture, so he used that very Scripture to address John's misunderstanding. He knew John was familiar with Isaiah 35, which says:

Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you. (v. 4)

These words had shaped John's expectations. But the passage continued:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. (vv. 5–6)

John needed to be reminded of the promised healing ministry of the Messiah, not just his promised vengeance. Jesus knew John was familiar with Isaiah 61's proclamation of "the day of vengeance of our God," but before that day, according to Isaiah 61, was to be a day of bringing good news to the poor, a day of binding up the brokenhearted, a day of proclaiming the Lord's favor. Jesus took John right to passages where the judgment of the Messiah is stressed and pointed him to the parts of those passages that speak of the Messiah's ministry of healing and blessing and proclaiming good news. It wasn't yet time for an axe. It wasn't yet time for fire. John needed to wait for the entire drama of redemptive history to unfold.

But of course, John would not be around to witness the event that is at the center of redemptive history. John would not be around to see with his eyes the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Though John had recognized Jesus to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he would not live to see Isaiah 53's Lamb led to slaughter, cut off from the land of the living, and stricken for the transgression of his people. John didn't fully understand that in his first coming, Jesus came, not to judge sinners but to bear sin. Jesus came not to punish transgressors but to be numbered among them. John was

like all the other Old Testament prophets who, according to 1 Peter 1, “searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories” (1 Pet. 1:10–11).

John the Baptist couldn’t see the suffering and glory of Jesus as clearly as you and I can today on this side of the cross, resurrection, and ascension. In fact, this is what Jesus was getting at when he said in Matthew 11:11: “Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets because he didn’t merely search and inquire about the Christ; he saw and experienced the Christ in his lifetime, which no other Old Testament prophet had ever done. But you and I and every believer who lives on this side of Pentecost are greater than John the Baptist because we haven’t just read about and anticipated being given the new heart of flesh that the prophet Ezekiel wrote about—we’ve experienced it.

Herod’s Missed Opportunity

John had his heart set on the kingdom of God and the coming King. He longed for him to set things right in this world. John had his mind filled with God’s word, even if he didn’t understand it perfectly or completely. But if we are tempted to think that the saintliness of John meant he would be immune from the cruelty of scoundrels, we are sorely mistaken.

For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. (Mark 6:17–20)

The name “Herod” is mentioned nearly fifty times in the New Testament, but the name refers to a number of different men. Understanding this mixed-up family takes a little effort. The Herods mentioned in the New Testament were all part of a dynasty of rulers who were set over Judea by the Roman Empire in 40 BC. They were descendants of Esau, not Jacob, but their ancestors had converted to Judaism. When the New Testament opens, we meet Herod the Great, and he was out to kill Jesus. You can imagine that a man who was willing to kill every male child under the age of two, just to make sure he got the one who posed a threat to him, was not the nicest of guys or the most nurturing of dads. Toward the end of his reign, thinking his own family was out to overthrow him, Herod the Great murdered one of his wives, her mother, his brother-in-law, and three of his sons. After Herod the Great’s death, his living sons (Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Herod Philip) split control of the region of Palestine. Herod Archelaus was placed over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea but was removed two years later. Herod Philip ruled over the Gaulanitis (the Golan Heights, east of the Jordan River). Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee. Herod Antipas is the Herod here in our passage.

Early in his reign, Herod Antipas married an Arabian princess. But on a visit to Rome, where he stayed with his half-brother, Herod Philip, he fell in love (or at least lust) with his brother’s wife, Herodias. They each divorced their spouses so they could marry each other. Now if all the brothers have names that start with Herod and one of them marries someone named Herodias, what does that suggest to you? Yes, this was an incestuous marriage, as Herodias was not only this Herod’s brother’s wife, she was also this Herod’s niece.

And then along came John, a man whose whole life was oriented around calling people to repentance and faith. His message was that the kingdom of God was at hand, and even Herod would have to bow to the divine King and should prepare for his coming through repentance. John took God’s word and obedience to it quite seriously. And

here was Herod, the appointed leader over God's people, flagrantly disobeying Leviticus 18:16, which says, "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife," as well as disobeying the seventh commandment: "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14).

Why couldn't John just look the other way? Why couldn't he just preach a nice sermon about the power of love and how it can change the world? Didn't he understand these two people were soul mates and that their love could not be denied? Apparently not. John was, according to Mark 6:20, "a righteous and holy man." He loved what was right and hated what was evil. Notice the text says in verse 18, "John *had been saying* to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." It seems as though this was more than a one-time confrontation. But Herod and Herodias had no interest in obeying God; no interest in a repentance that would require that they say no to their romantic, relational, and sexual desires. They just wanted to follow their hearts and not God's law. They had the opportunity to repent and be reconciled to God through the ministry of John the Baptist. They could have had their sins forgiven and made a fresh start. But instead, they dug in. And evidently John refused to let it go. His repeated calls to repentance made Herodias so mad, she wanted to kill John and began looking for an opportunity to do it.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he

did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. (Mark 6:21–28)

Herod had invited all the big shots from around Galilee to his birthday party. But this banquet was more like a bachelor party. When Herodias's daughter came in and danced, and we read that she “pleased” Herod and his guests, I think we're meant to imagine this scene in all its sickening sensuality. Herod was aroused by his young stepdaughter—so aroused he was not thinking clearly and made a crazy promise. This promise presented Herodias with the opportunity she had been looking for to silence the voice—the voice of one crying in the wilderness, the voice that had been preaching in the palace: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.” An opportunity presented itself, and she was ready to take it. However, what she saw as her opportunity to silence John the Baptist's voice was really her final opportunity to repent. Sadly, it was a missed opportunity.

The voice calling for preparation for judgment through confession of sin and repentance was silenced by a pair of scoundrels bent on having their own way.

On the night that Jesus was arrested, the religious leaders took him to Pilate, the Roman governor over Judea. Pilate didn't know what to do with this Jesus, in whom he found no guilt. But then he heard that Jesus had been teaching in Galilee and decided he would rid himself of this problem prisoner by sending him to the Roman ruler over Galilee, Herod Antipas, who happened to be in Jerusalem that night.

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. (Luke 23:8–9)

Herod had loved keeping John around to hear him preach, even though Herod had no intention of responding in repentance to John's preaching. A short time later, this same fascination with spiritual things had Herod wanting to see Jesus. He wanted to see Jesus do one of those miracles he'd heard about, even though Herod again had no intention of opening up his life to a miracle accomplished in his own heart through repentance and faith.

The voice had confronted Herod again and again, beckoning him toward repentance, but Herod had resisted and refused again and again. He repeatedly silenced the voice of conviction when John was alive and then silenced the voice of conviction for good by ending John's life. And now, here was Jesus standing before him, and Jesus was unwilling to speak at all. Jesus knew Herod had no interest in humbling himself and was merely seeking to amuse himself. Sadly, as Jesus refused to speak, it became clear that Herod had missed his opportunity to repent.

The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing [Jesus]. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:10–11)

- ✦ John had used his voice to proclaim the coming of the Christ, while Herod used his voice to mock Christ.
- ✦ John's heart was filled with joy in Jesus's presence, while Herod's heart was filled with contempt in Jesus's presence.
- ✦ John invested his life in preparing people to come under the rule of King Jesus, while Herod wasted his life mocking the rule of King Jesus.

John the Baptist and Herod present us with a stark contrast that should prompt us to turn our gaze inward, into the condition of our own hearts and lives. It should bring us to ask ourselves:

- ✦ Is my heart set on the kingdom of God, or am I too busy building my own kingdom?
- ✦ Am I putting myself under the authority of God's word, or am I merely entertained by God's word?
- ✦ Is my life bearing fruit in keeping with repentance, or is it bearing fruit in keeping with rebellion?
- ✦ Is my life marked by the fruit of the Spirit, or is it driven by the lust of the flesh?
- ✦ Am I pursuing holiness in light of the coming judgment, or am I presuming upon protection in the coming judgment?
- ✦ Am I confessing my guilt so that my conscience is cleansed, or have I simmered in guilt so that my conscience has become seared?

Herod's missed opportunity stands as a warning to every person who hears the gospel and toys with it instead of taking hold of it. Herod's missed opportunity stands as a warning to every person who might be interested in hearing Bible teaching but has no intention to let it change her; no intention to allow it to interfere in how she uses her power, her money, her sexuality, and her time; and no intention of allowing it to disrupt the status quo of her life. My friend, resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit at great peril—the peril that your conscience will become seared by your own repeated resistance so that you can no longer feel it being pricked anymore. What a tragedy to resist the call of Christ for so long that the day comes when his voice is silenced in your life.

When John the Baptist came to Herod as a voice speaking into the wilderness that was Herod's life, Herod's home, and Herod's heart, Herod could have humbled himself and separated himself from his incestuous relationship with Herodias. Herod could have bowed to the true King, Jesus Christ, and been transformed. He could have experienced the baptism by fire, a baptism that changes a spiritually dead person into a spiritually alive person. But he loved his sin way too much. He loved his autonomy way too much. He had no interest in the humbling required to say,

“I’ve been wrong about pretty much everything, and everything in my life is going to have to be reordered around Jesus beginning today.” The day came for Herod when, after having said “no” to the word of God that he had heard again and again, after having again and again doused the glimmer of hope that he could actually live a new life of holiness rather than one filled with shame, Jesus no longer spoke to him.

John’s call is really the Spirit of God’s call to respond to the reality of the coming of Jesus by clearing the way for him in your own heart and life through repentance. Next time, Jesus will come in judgment. Next time, the axe will fall; the fire will burn.

Don’t say you’ll do something about this later. Later, the opportunity might be gone.

Don’t hold on so tight to whatever sin you think you can’t live without that you do not take hold of Jesus.

Come to the waters that cleanse. Confess and be forgiven.

You don’t have to live in fear of the axe at the root of the tree of your life or the fire that would burn away the chaff of your life. Instead, you can live in glad expectation of the coming of the King, knowing that you are prepared for his coming through repentance and faith.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure;
Save from wrath and make me pure.

Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.⁴

The story of Jesus in the Gospels includes all kinds of interesting people—some who claimed to be saints but proved to be scoundrels, as well as scoundrels who were transformed into saints. In *Saints and Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus*, Nancy Guthrie provides a fresh look into what shaped and motivated people such as John the Baptist, Peter, the Pharisees, Zacchaeus, Judas, Caiaphas, Barabbas, Stephen, and Paul. Join her as she reintroduces us to these biblical characters, helping us to see more clearly the ways in which they reveal the generous grace of Jesus toward sinners.

“*Saints and Scoundrels in the Story of Jesus* is convicting and comforting at once, reminding all true believers that God’s family is rough around the edges and held together by grace and blood and faith and the King of kings and Lord of lords who makes himself lowly and gentle for the salvation of his people.”

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