

The dictionary defines “expectation” as a strong belief that something will happen or be the case in the future.

American poet Carl Sandburg has a poem about a college professor who earned a doctor’s degree from the University of Heidelberg, and had a variety of experiences far removed from the university setting. Once, for instance, he lived for six weeks in a tent looking into the face of the Great Sphinx of Egypt. One morning as he was shaving, he asked the Sphinx to tell him something worth knowing. The Sphinx broke its long silence and said: “Don’t expect too much.”

“If you don’t expect anything, you won’t be disappointed,” we often hear people say. But that is a pretty depressing outlook on life. Don’t you think? Yet at times, in part at least, because of past disappointments, we allow a spirit of non-expectancy to settle over our lives. In fact, God may be very close at hand without our recognizing his activity. The good news of the gospel tells us that Christ our Lord is eternally near, but it’s not always easy to recognize him when life is bearing down on us with its worries and tragedies. There are so many things that can preoccupy our attention: our burdens and problems, our regrets, our guilt, our dreams and ambitions, pleasures, making a living, getting an education, succeeding, or simply surviving.

Clif Christopher* writes: In February of 1991, the world witnessed the ground invasion of Iraq by the United States and a coalition of over thirty nations. Nearly one million troops were assembled in Saudi Arabia—500,000 of whom came from the United States—to evict Saddam Hussein and his army from Kuwait. Such numbers were needed because Saddam had an army of over one million soldiers with up-to-date equipment and munitions. The thought of most experts was that it would be an extremely tough fight to get through the Iraqi infantry, artillery, and armored units.

When the ground offensive started, led by the First Armored Division of the United States Army; the first Iraqi troops they encountered quickly came up out of their trenches and out of their bunkers and surrendered without firing a shot. At the mere sound of an approaching American helicopter or tank, they waved white flags, threw up their hands, and gave up. The allied forces were initially and considerably slowed down, not by the fighting, but by having to deal with prisoners of war. Later on some fierce battles took place, but aided in large part by this first wave of surrenders, the American and allied forces marched into Kuwait in four days and saw an army of one million fold its tent and go home. They had been defeated!

What happened? Quite simply, though about one million soldiers existed on both sides, the Iraqi first-line soldiers did not want to fight. They had been recruited or drafted, outfitted with a uniform and a rifle and sent to the front line. They were not trained, however, to fight. They wanted nothing to do with the conflict. Many did not even believe in the cause. The Iraqi officials had just taken any able-bodied man they could find off the street and placed him in the army so they could strut around saying, “Look how big and bad we are.” In truth, of their one-million-man army, only about 250,000 really had an *expectancy* to fight.

I fear that what we have done in the church is to recruit the Iraqi army as Christ's army. We have laid out low expectations, if any at all. We have not fully trained our troops before bringing them in as "full members." We have checked to see if they were upright and breathing and then placed them on the rolls as quickly as possible. They received an ID card and a name tag, but we never fully expressed a set of expectations.

When the pastor [in most churches today] preaches that it is time to rise up and engage a world full of unbelievers, march boldly against social ills in society, give powerfully to the starving around the world, and spread the gospel to our neighborhoods, most of the congregation just throws their hands up and surrenders. So in the face of fewer and fewer persons claiming Christ as Savior, more and more going hungry, growing discrimination, abounding addictions, and rumors of war, the church has not led. It has thrown up its hands and waved the white flag.

But it's not about what we might be expecting. What is Christ's expectation of us? He would not tolerate us being perpetually idle and unprepared, yet sometimes our preoccupations—perhaps even with good and worthwhile things—prevent us from recognizing what he really expects of us. Jesus wants us to DO something by way of living out our faith and many of us would rather not do it. But this is what he expects, nonetheless.

In most mainline Protestant churches, like ours, expectations are shared with a sense of apology. Accountability is often nonexistent. What many churches these days have found is that when it comes to giving, service, and attendance, people have lived up to the low expectations that have been set for them. This has translated into giving of less than 2 percent of income, a membership roll attendance at worship services of around 35 percent, and mission support at the lowest level in the nearly fifty years of counting missions spending.

What does Jesus say about this? In verse 14: "*But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*" And then, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven*" in verse 21. Translation? Jesus has *very high expectations* of us. Much higher than we have of ourselves.

In the very last chapter of Matthew's gospel we read the matchless story of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary's early morning visit to Christ's tomb. In the end it was not the women who found Christ, but Christ who found them. They had been seeking him to no avail; then they discovered that he was seeking them, and were found by him. His search for us always precedes our search for him, and when we find him, we discover that we have been found.

This is a marvelous truth of the gospel, permeating the whole of Jesus' mission and message. He talked about a seeking God, and his own life gave evidence of the depth of that conviction. He came to seek and to save the lost! This is very good news, friends! If we stray from God, we can be sure that God is not far from us. When it seems that we have lost all contact with God, when our spiritual life is thin, drab, or meager, God has not gone off somewhere and left us alone. God comes seeking us in our lostness. And there is hope for the reestablishment of our relationship with God, because God has already taken the initiative to find us and to restore us to divine fellowship.

I remember seeing a cartoon once that pictured a man looking at a bulletin board that was supposed to have a “thought for the day” on it. It was a holiday, and the sign read: “Due to the holiday, there is no thought for the day.” It may seem at times as if God has taken a holiday or extended vacation, but Jesus’ coming to the two Mary’s outside the garden tomb tells us of a God who rises in the midst of death and seeks us out in our own sorrow and trouble and doubt and despair. This means that at no time and in absolutely no place are we hopelessly shut off from God.

If our own faithfulness was all we had to depend upon, our prospects would be dim indeed. But God in Christ keeps rising in the graveyard of our doubts, failures, despairs, broken promises, and recurring dreams, and he finds us and calls us by name and gives us hope and joy again!

Perhaps today we should consider whether or not our expectations match the Lord’s expectations of us. We may have expected Christ to stay where we put him, where we can conveniently keep track of him, all the while he keeps moving ahead and moving us toward new opportunities for ministry and mission. We may be focusing on what has happened in the past, while he wants to be a living presence with us. We may not even recognize him because of the haze of non-expectancy or the blur of preoccupation.

In such times, it might be helpful if we remember his teaching that describes his expectations of us that we find at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7. Jesus’ disciples were not yet fully trained, or even close to it. Jesus had just finished going over with them what the Christian life was like as far as behavior and lifestyle. It was fairly radical, to be honest. Jesus pulled no punches with his closest followers or with any others who were considering a life as his disciple. He had the highest of expectations.

As the end drew near for Moses, he spoke to God’s people, saying, ‘*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live*’ (Deuteronomy 30:15&19). When Joshua laid out the leadership of the nation at the end of his life, he also presented them with a choice: ‘*Choose this day whom you will serve*’ (Joshua 24: 15). In Matthew 7 Jesus plainly taught that, “*Broad is the road that leads to destruction*” and “*Narrow the road that leads to life.*” That is the choice with which Jesus leaves us in this passage.

Elegy written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray is considered a truly immortal poem by literature experts. Some describe it as the best-known and best-loved poem in English. Gray began writing it in the summer of 1742. It wasn’t completed and circulated until 1750. Its dignified and precise perfection of style took Gray EIGHT years to produce.

No one ever created a masterpiece by taking a short cut. In this world, we must constantly choose between short cuts that promise immediate results, or the long way that offers results that are far, far beyond our expectations. The long way, the narrow road, is the best way in the end.

Jesus has this expectation of us—a strong belief that something will happen or be the case in the future—that we *will* choose the right road. Amen.

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