

Great Expectations

Introduction

Charles Dickens edited a weekly literary magazine that he called "All the Year Round". From Dec 1860 'til Aug 1861 wrote in it, in instalments, his semi-autobiographical novel *Great Expectations*. It told the story of Pip who is kind to a criminal who is later caught, convicted and sent to Australia, where he makes a fortune. He intends leaving his fortune to Pip out of gratitude, as he has no son of his own. But Pip's Great Expectations of inheriting Magwitch's fortune come to nothing when Magwitch secretly returns to England and is living with Pip, but is caught and dies in prison and all his wealth is seized by the crown.

So often we set out with great expectations only to find them dashed by unforeseen circumstances. That is a fact of life. We cannot ever guarantee that what we expect will turn out the way we wanted it to. Another 'Great Expectations' is the name of a US online dating agency! And there is probably no area of life in which our *great expectations* are rarely fulfilled than in our relationships. As has been pointed out many times since the times of Heraclitus of Ephesus in the 5th C BC, we have to *expect the unexpected*, because that is how life is. We may be surprised by the unexpected, but when it comes we have to handle it. We need to be ready to face the unexpected.

Jesus' Teaching

Basically we have to live life as it comes. Jesus taught us this: Matt 6:31-34, "*So don't worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' Unbelievers search after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them, so seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will care about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*" We have to live each day at a time, as it comes, and responding as positively as we can to all the unforeseen circumstances, the challenges and the 'poo' that gets thrown at us. Even in a seemingly no-win situation, many rise above it.

The Necessity of Faith

Watching wounded soldiers returning from Afghanistan on TV, the way people with horrendous disabilities cope and the way people pick themselves up after unimaginable disasters, are amazing and humbling. The common factor in all such achievement is faith. If we believe that we can overcome whatever obstacle stands in our way, that failure is not an option and are determined to press through whatever stands in our way, we will eventually win. Even Professor Hawkin has faith – not in God – but such faith to have made a remarkable contribution to humanity.

The destroyers of faith are resignation, pessimism, cynicism, negativity, unbelief and the like. In life every one of us has to face disappointment, disaster, failure, frustration and challenges. But these are not the destroyers. It is what we do with them and how we react to them, that either lifts us up or destroys us. If we give into them we go down, but if we handle them rightly, we can rise above them and beat them, turning 'setbacks into comebacks' or 'stumbling blocks into springboards'.

This is true of all human beings, believers in Christ or not. It is a general observation and principle of life, and we begin to face challenges and making such choices quite early in our lives. Some are enabled to rise above their circumstances and get out of it, some out of sheer determination but many do so because they get help. Yesterday at the Willow Creek conference we heard about *Toms Shoes* which has distributed almost a million shoes to children in third world countries – one for every pair sold commercially, and *Compassion* which enables sponsors to pay for a third world child's education and many end up as doctors, nurses, teachers and pastors, able to make a significant contribution into their world. But one of the greatest things which turns a nobody into a somebody is Christian conversion.

There are many remarkable stories of people whose lives were out of control, who had a negative attitude to life and no expectation of anything, who try to shut out the pain by getting drunk or stoned on drugs trying to have a good time. Suddenly somehow their lives were turned completely upside down by an encounter with Christ. They had no expectations and suddenly they find a new life. The God they once ignored or even ridiculed became so real to them they suddenly found a new faith in him that affected all their expectations of what their life could actually be. One amazing discovery that effects such a life change is realising that God has great expectations for us.

God's True Expectations of Us

Now most people think that if God exists, he must have very high moral and ethical expectations of us. We all believe this and so some will try to attain high standards, while others think that God's standards are unattainable, so why bother? Of course that is right. God standards are so high that they are totally unattainable by any of us. None of us ever attain our own standards, let alone God's. But God is not stupid, he knows this, and so why would he ever put on us the sort of expectations we imagine he has of us. It is a mistake to think that God expects us to be good, when we can't possibly be. God's expectations of us are actually totally different to this.

He does not expect us to be good, just to love him. He expects us to recognise that we are so much smaller and weaker than God that we will trust in him and depend on him for everything. Faith in ourselves can get us a long way. But faith in ourselves will always fall short of God's expectations, because he expects us to

recognise our incompetence, our need of him and turn humbly to him, change our direction and give ourselves over to obey him. As Chris Kilby told us two weeks ago, when God judges all human beings at the end of the world the only criterion to get into heaven is not how good we have been, but did we know God? Did we have a child-son relationship with God in this life, because the only ones that God will allow into his eternal Kingdom to be with him forever are his own children.

This makes sense - if we have no time for God in this life why would we want to spend eternity with him, and why should God want to spend eternity with us? God has done the unimaginable in order to secure the possibility that corrupted human beings, as we are, can be 'born again' and become his own children; to be completely forgiven, cleaned out from everything inside us that is so offensive to God, and then to top it all he sends his Spirit to come and live inside us and fill us with his vitality and strength, so we can face the struggles of life with him inside us. That's the deal.

The Unimaginable Act of God

All we have to offer him is our selfishness, pride and all sorts of other rubbish and he takes all that and turns us into precious jewels. Mediaeval alchemists never did find a way of turning lead into gold, but God turns our filth into diamonds! The unimaginable thing that made this all possible is when Jesus, God's son, freely gave himself up, took all our filth on himself and became so disgusting in God's eyes that God had to turn his face away from his own dear son. This remarkable act in history is so incredible that many people can't accept it, which is their loss. Those who do accept it find that they are washed clean, totally forgiven and now live a new life.

Life doesn't become a bed of roses. We still face all the same difficult circumstances, problems and pain, but now we are different inside. We have God with us and he can give us the faith and determination we need to win. He has great expectations of us and wants to see us win - but we can do it only if we have great expectations of him. It is not automatic.

The great missionary pioneer Wm. Carey addressed the Northampton Baptist Association in May 1792. Quoting from Is 54:2, he came out with this classic saying, "**Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.**" As a consequence of that message the BMS was started. What great expectations can we have of God? Well if I was to go through the bible and list all the things we might expect from God, we would be here for another hour at least, so I'll let you do that exercise yourself.

Great Expectations

What great expectations does he have of us? He expects us to trust him. You don't know what is going on, your own *great expectations* have been dashed to pieces. He says, "Trust me. Don't give in to disappointment, cynicism, defeat; they will destroy you. Trust in me. Trust in me and talk to me about everything that is going on - don't blame me for all the evil that people do, don't moan to other people; Yes moan

to me and pour your anger out on me, I can handle it, then when you've got it off your chest – trust me. Have hope. Expect the unexpected.”

We express our dependence on God by praying, and as I mentioned earlier, then Lord has been talking to us about becoming a community of prayer. Not just praying on our own, but together. God has great expectations of us, which begins with us talking everything through with him, asking him for bigger and bigger things, not for ourselves but for his kingdom to come and his purposes to be accomplished on this earth and then.. attempting stuff that might make it happen!

So where do we begin? Can I urge you to join us for prayer – we know it is hard, our bodies find it harder to pray than even doing exercise! So come on guys – it's a challenge to rise to. In the next four weeks we will do some preparation in our groups for this. (Last week's sheet is available) Then after half term we will meet together here on Wednesday nights to learn how to pray together, and take some steps towards becoming a community of prayer. Add in to that Thursday mornings which is an even tougher challenge and sacrifice, Sunday mornings before our meeting here we will be praying together - more details to follow, and we will be extending our termly weeks of prayer with a half-night of prayer on the Friday evenings, which will be the most challenging and exciting of all our 'community of prayer' events. So let's have some great expectations, burn our book of excuses and as we **expect great things from God** let us also **attempt great things for God**.

Phil Rogers. 3rd Oct 2010