

# Waking Up From the Fear of Insignificance

by Stewart Ruch

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*Living a significant life means being surrendered to Jesus and being full of Him through repentance and contrition.*

**Duration:** 25:01

**Scripture:** Isaiah 40:3, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 11:6, Matthew 11:11-12, Matthew 11:28-29

**Topics:** "Insecurity"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the fear of living a life of insignificance. He uses the example of the character Salieri from the movie Amadeus, who feels his own life is insignificant compared to the brilliance of Mozart. The speaker then explores the two elements that fuel the fear of insignificance: suffering and a lack of purpose. However, Jesus offers a different perspective by painting a picture of a significant life through the example of John the Baptist.

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## Transcript

And his life has a rich sense of purpose and significance until he hears Amadeus Mozart play. And when he hears the genius of Mozart, he is thrown into an incredible sense of life despair. All of a sudden, the life that he thought he had that was so significant appears absolutely insignificant.

Indeed, the faith and the promise that he thought God had given him of a fruitful musical career now seems absolutely dashed in the light and the face of the brilliance of Mozart. At the end of the movie, there's this incredible line where Salieri sort of rocks his head back and says, I am the patron saint of mediocrity. I remember going, whoa, is that how things could finish up for me? Not so bad, not so good, just mediocre and insignificant life.

I was going to a very competitive high school at the time. I was a good student, but there were always better students. I was a good athlete.

There were always better athletes. Contrast Salieri's comment near the end of his life in the film to this comment made at the end of another man's life, the Gerard Manley Hopkins, 19th century Christian poet. Hopkins is recorded to have said this as his last words on his deathbed.

I'm so happy. I am so happy. I loved my life.

Patron saint of mediocrity. I loved my life. I loved my life full of purpose.

Hopkins was saying, I loved my life full of significance. That fear I had in my late teens has visited me again and again and again. The life that I am living and at the end of my life, the life that I've lived and I've had seasons of life where I deeply question, am I making any significant contribution or is this life that I'm living this day in and day out often so challenging, so exhausting at times, unfulfilling, unsatisfying life? Is this life just an insignificant exercise in the human experience or is my life matter? Have I done something of significant worth? Well, I finished my life as Hopkins did and said, I loved my life because it was significant.

What is significance? How do we even think about it? We are given in this portrait of John the baptizer, a portrait of one that Jesus will extol. We are first given a portrait of John in the throes of the fear of insignificance. We have John who has come to the end of his life.

He's in prison. He will soon be gruesomely beheaded. Asking the question, is everything that I've given my life for real and significant? Have I made a difference or not? Indeed, we see in John the baptist moment, these realities, these things that fuel a life of insignificance or a fear of insignificance and we'll look at that.

And then we see Jesus pivot in this passage and paint a picture of a significant life using John the baptist as his portrait. This passage breaks into two parts. One is that which fuels insignificance, the fuel of insignificance that can come upon our lives.

And two, the focus of significance, the real significance. How is it that we live a significant life, especially a spiritually significant life? Look with me in this text. The text breaks into two parts here in Matthew.

The first section I want to talk about as the fuel of insignificance. When we're haunted by insignificance, when we're haunted that we may live our lives in insignificance, what fuels that fear? And we see at least two elements that are fueling the fear of insignificance for John. And then we see Jesus shift the passage and he paints a picture with John as the portrait of a life of significance, the focus of a significant life.

We had the fuel of insignificance verses 2 through 6, the focus of a significant life verses 7 through 11. Let's look at this passage together. Verse 2. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus through his disciples, are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another? One New Testament scholar translates that.

Are you the one who is to come or should we expect a different kind of coming one? What we have in this moment is John questioning the very significance of Christ and thereby the very significance of his own life because he has given his life to prepare the way for this Christ and to proclaim this Christ. What we have is that John the Baptist, John the Baptist, John the Baptist who is in his mother's womb when he meets Jesus in his mother's womb and has such a connection, mysterious connection, with Christ that literally in utero John the Baptist kicks Elizabeth's womb to connect with Jesus in Mary's womb. It's John the Baptist who is the first to say, look, behold, here is the Lamb of God who rescues humanity from the imprisonment of sin.

It was John the Baptist who said, I baptize with water but he is one who will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist again and again and again, the one that could be depended on for clarity when it came to the person of Christ. And it was John the Baptist who finds himself in a moment saying, are you, are you the one or is there another one to come? If John the Baptist doubts the significance of Christ and thereby his own significance, how much more might we brothers and sisters, many of us who consider ourselves committed followers of Jesus, how much more might we have moments where we doubt the

significance of our own work, the significance of our own lives, the significance of Christ himself.

What's happened to John? How did he come into this framework? I think we have a clue there in verse two. It's an interesting phrase. Now, when John heard in prison about the deeds of Christ, he's heard about the deeds of Christ.

It would seem to follow then that when John hears about the deeds of Christ, he's encouraged. He should actually be saying, oh, send message how I rejoice that you are the coming one. Send message, send message of jubilation that even though I am in prison and I face execution, which he would be gruesomely executed by a beheading, even though I face death, I rejoice in the power of God.

I rejoice in the Lord always. I say again, rejoice. He's seen the deeds of Christ.

What's happened? Is it perhaps the deeds of Christ have not equal what John thought would be the deeds of Christ? Is it perhaps that John has created a Jesus plus his personal expectation? A Jesus plus that the coming Lamb of God would have a particular way of going about his mission of freeing humanity from sin? That perhaps this Jesus would be far more effective than he has been in his work of bringing the kingdom of God. No overthrow of the existing power structure. It hasn't happened.

A rather ineffectual and sporadic healing ministry. Take one example. He heals one of his followers, mother-in-law, of a kind of malady.

It spreads around the village. People are so amazed Jesus has healing power that people line up at the house of this woman. Any of the rest of us would have said, this is revival.

Let's make this. Let's go for this. We're going to heal everybody in this town.

He goes to the next town. There's lepers everywhere and he heals. We have record just a few of them.

Well, wait, what is Jesus doing? John might be asking. His deeds aren't the deeds of the coming king of the universe who has brought the justice of God. John has attached to Jesus a personal expectation, fueled by his understanding of scripture, but a personal expectation all the same.

John has entered into what every one of us enter into, which is a Jesus plus our personal expectation. And in that moment, when we attach that to Jesus and he does not deign to conform to our expectation, there's a profound unsettlement. And perhaps we begin to question the very significance of what we've done and who he is.

We do it all the time, don't we? I remember a conversation with a young family out in the North Ex. A few months ago, they came from another part of the upper Midwest and not a part of our parish, and they were just exhausted. They had the gray look.

They had four young kids under the age of six. Their daughter was running around. She was the oldest.

And the father leaned into me and he said, we had a really pretty house and neat place in the South, had this great Christian life. I was so excited about being a dad. And then our daughter was born and she's been diagnosed with a form of autism, pretty high on the spectrum.

I honestly, Stuart, just didn't think that that's what Jesus would let happen. I didn't expect it. It just didn't match with what I'd hoped for.

You could see they were recovering. Yes, recovering from the absolute fatigue of caring and loving a special needs child, but it was more than that. They were recovering because, like any of us, they had a personal expectation of a life that was more harmonious than disruptive, more joyful than at times sad.

And you could tell he was questioning the very significance of his work. It happens all the time, doesn't it? We attach Jesus plus something that we expect from him, and when he doesn't deliver on that expectation, we find ourselves cut adrift. Katharine, I put our house on the market.

Some of you may know that. We prayed about it a lot this spring. Thought about it a lot this summer.

Talked to a lot of our close friends. Everyone said, this is a good idea. You should move forward on this.

This seems right. We got a lot of affirmation toward that end. Thought four to six weeks, five months later, no movement on our house.

A handful of showings and not one house that we're interested in moving into. Nothing. I thought if we got prophetic words from other people, and we thought in prayer this was right, that certainly my expectation was a month, two months, and then we're on the move.

What do you do with that? What was your personal expectation? Thought you'd be married by now? Thought you'd have a great marriage by now? Look at verse six. Jesus sees this in John, and so Jesus gives this phrase, blessed is the one who is not offended by me. Your two most important words are by me.

Your second most important word is offended. What Jesus is saying, what Jesus is saying is you can never add any expectation plus me. I am your expectation.

I am the fulfillment of your life. I am the focus and the purpose of your life. Whenever you begin to add accretions that are of a personal nature, even if you think that they are particularly spiritually interpreted, you become confused.

As a matter of fact, I become an offense to you. The word offense there is the word from which we get scandal. What happens is a scandal happens.

We're always caught off guard. A scandal means what we expected about somebody actually isn't what actually happens. We're scandalized in that moment, disrupted, surprised.

And what Jesus is saying is blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me. You have nothing else but me, John, Jesus is saying. You must let go of your personal expectation, your personal interpretation of what it means that I am the Lamb of God who comes to save the world from its sin, and you must only rely on me.

That's all you've got. I am your significance, and anything that you attach significance to beyond me will always become dust, an insignificant reality. I'm all you have.

Jesus is the scandal, and he alone is our lives, and if we live not that way, then we will be offended by him. We'll be offended that he's not turned out our life as we expected him to do so, and Jesus says, oh, you are blessed. You are blessed if I am not a scandal to you.

It's key in the season of Advent that we do some Advent math, and then we figure out that component on the other side of the plus sign with Jesus, and we courageously subtract it. We take it out. We name it.

We identify it. This is my personal expectation that I have conjoined to Jesus himself. I identify it, and I repent of it.

For some of you, it's just become an obsession. For others of you, it's an idea. For others of you, it's a subtle part of your life.

It just kind of creates this baseline sense of insignificance and disappointment, but whatever it might be, the Advent work of preparing for the way of the Lord is the work of subtracting whatever's on the other side of that addition call. I love how Benedict, sixth century Christian thinker and leader, put it. He said, prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ.

Those are great five words. Prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ. You see something else fueling that sense of insignificance for John? Because we see him in prison.

It was a treacherous prison. It was one of Herod's prisons outside of Jerusalem. He knows that he will likely die.

John is suffering. He's truly and deeply suffering, and the reality of suffering is that it's a long, tedious, exhausting march. If you have suffered in your life from physical, mental, or emotional realities, you know the long, exhausting march of suffering, and it drains you of a sense of purpose.

It takes from you a sense of significance. The only sense you have is, can I, will I, and when will this finally be over? And John is in that place where he is suffering, and the antidote to John's suffering is that Jesus tries to take him a picture bigger than the suffering that is so acute and right in front of him. He tries to send the messengers back with a picture of the kingdom of God and the reality of God breaking into this world that the lame are walking, and the blind are seeing, and the deaf are hearing, and the poor are having good news preached to them, and we move into suffering.

Our life becomes autobiography, and it is so important that we open our lives in the suffering moments of the biography of the holy church by coming and being a part of her, to the reality of Jesus and his life and his word, and I find it especially helpful that when I'm in a suffering season to read again the lives of those who have given their lives for Christ, biography after biography after biography of the saints and those who've been faithful. Open my vision to the reality that there is more than the suffering that I am so acutely experiencing, because suffering feeds a sense of insignificance, and then Jesus pivots. It's beautiful.

He's said kind of a corrective word to John, blessed is the one who's not offended by me. John, don't be offended here at the end of your life. We know later that John is not.

He is faithful to the end, but then Jesus pivots, and he actually wants to give you a picture of a significant life. John's disciples go on. We read in verse 7. The disciples went away, and Jesus now moves to the crowds, and he says, let me tell you about a significant life.

Here's what a significant life looks like. It looks like the life of John the baptizer. What made him significant? Was he significant because he knew how to respond in a very sort of winsome way to the blowing winds of culture? Was he like a reed swing in the wind who just always seems impressive and with it and connected and hip? Is that why John was significant? No.

Was he significant because he was a person of incredible influence? He wore soft clothes like those who are able to have influence in the court of the king. Did that make him significant? No. What made John significant? John was one who prepared the way for me.

John was a prophetic preparer of the way of Jesus. What does that mean? To be a prophetic preparer of the way of Jesus is to be so absolutely willing to live Jesus and not Jesus plus. So absolutely willing to endure whatever suffering comes into our lives and cling to Jesus in the midst of it.

To be so absolutely willing to give up ourselves to Christ that we provide no obstacle to anyone who wants to see Jesus himself. The work of preparation is the work of bringing Christ immediate to others. Emmanuel is an urgent, immediate connection with God.

That's the heart of Emmanuel. And those who prepare the way for Emmanuel do everything in their lives to be so full of Jesus through repentance. So full of Jesus through contrition.

So full of Jesus through resolutely refusing to add any expectation on Christ other than Jesus himself. That when you're around them, Jesus is there. He's there.

There's a poetic image in Isaiah 40. It's an advent image. That every valley shall be raised up.

Every mountain shall be made low. So that a level plane is created for the seeing of Jesus himself. And our lives are about raising up people's valleys.

Bringing down their mountains. That Jesus might be absolutely seen, connected, and met. People meet Jesus in you when you're absolutely surrendered to his power and his glory.

I love people like that. I just love people that are full of Jesus. I'm always seeking them out.

I love to spend time with them. I come away with them and I feel like I was with the Lord. My predecessor here at Resurrection is like that.

William Beasley. The man who was pastor before me. Kath and I faced a very challenging moment in early summer.

And it was a moment of sort of confusion and some spiritual challenge and some other interpersonal challenges. And Kath and I said, man, we just need to get closer to the Lord right now. Let's call William.

Let's just have him come over because he'll bring Jesus with him. And so that's what we did. He came over and he sat and he prayed with us, and he brought Jesus with him.

He brought our valley up. He brought our mountain low. That's the work of preparation.

That's the work of significance. That is a significant life. Jesus.

Jesus. Not offended. If you're younger and you're wondering, how do I chart a significant life? Prepare the way.

If you're older and you're wondering if I've wasted a lot of time, perhaps you have. It's not too late. Repent of your addition.

Embrace a holy subtraction. Prepare the way. Everyone is given the ability to do this.

In conclusion, look at verse 11. Cryptic Jesus. Truly, I say to you, 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. Now, that's a verse if you're reading through your Bible and you read that, you go, oh, I don't understand that. Let's move on.

Verse 12. Okay. Don't do that.

Okay. When you're studying your Bible, don't do that. When you find a verse, you go, what does that verse mean? Go.

All right. I'm diving in. I'm going to push on this verse because this verse is actually really important.

Now, I'm not sure exactly what it means either, but I'm going to try. I'm going to push. Okay.

It's very possible. The one thing Jesus is saying is that he has talked about John the Baptist. He's painted a portrait of significance in John the Baptist.

But lest everybody goes, but that's John the Baptist. I mean, even then we know that he's somewhat unique. He now wants to make sure that everyone who is listening, the crowd, verse 7, understands that John the Baptist was born of a woman.

He's going to be seen as the last of the Old Testament leaders in some ways. He bridges Old Testament and New Testament. He was born of a woman, but not so you.

For you now, because the bridegroom is here, you now, because God is immediately and urgently with us, you now can be born of the kingdom of God. He baptized with what? Water. I baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit.

Everyone who lives in the kingdom of God, even the least significant seeming of those who live in the kingdom of God, have everything they need to live an utterly and absolutely significant life. Those who are born of the kingdom, born of the Holy Spirit, born of the gift of baptism in the Christian church, every single one of them have everything that they need to live a profoundly significant life, bringing others into an immediate and full sense of Jesus right there. You guys are all over the place in Chicago land, and everywhere you go, as you leave tonight, as you go out tomorrow, you bring the immediate sense of Jesus if you'll bring the valleys up and the mountains low.

If you're repentant, any subtraction that you've, any addition you've had in your life, make a proper subtraction. Christians full of Jesus, interspersed throughout the community, that's significance. It's they who die saying, I loved my life.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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