



"Some people will never learn anything because they understand everything too soon."

—Alexander Pope

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## Not-So-Great Expectations

Near the beginning of his gospel, John makes an astonishing declaration. Though it may be familiar to us, having read it often, its singularity should still electrify us: "And *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" ([John 1:14](#)). To the Greek mind, that a god—let alone *the* God—would debase himself by becoming flesh and blood was preposterous. John's announcement was a psychological earthquake, a force that violently shook reality, requiring a reevaluation of all thought.

As fantastic as this was, almost as astounding is John's earlier declaration: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" ([John 1:11](#)). Whether we understand "His own" to be limited to Israel and Judah or to comprise all men, the essence is the same: [God](#) became a man, but His now-fellow men would not accept Him. At every turn, He was doubted, challenged, and scorned by people blinded and enslaved by their expectations of what God *should* be like.

With rare exception, the people did not recognize who He was, and they did not believe Him when He told them because their minds already had a firm

image of what the Messiah *should* be like, as well as how the prophecies of His coming *should* be fulfilled. Their ideas about these things were so ironclad that they were unable to recognize the reality standing in front of them.

The people of Jesus' time had expectations about where the Messiah should come from ([John 1:46](#)) and about what He should do and not do ([Matthew 11:19](#); [12:2](#), 10; [15:2](#); [17:24](#))—and when ([Mark 2:24](#); [3:2](#); [John 5:8-10](#)). They had expectations about the rituals and traditions they thought He and His followers should keep ([Matthew 15:2](#); [Mark 7:1-5](#)), about what He should say ([Matthew 15:12](#); [19:3](#), 21-22), about whom He should associate with ([Matthew 9:11](#); [11:19](#); [Mark 2:16](#)), and about how He should do His job ([Matthew 16:21-22](#)). They had expectations about His signs and miracles ([Matthew 12:38](#); [16:1](#); [26:67-68](#); [27:40](#), 42; [Mark 8:11](#); [John 2:18](#)). They even had expectations about which family He should be from ([Matthew 13:55-57](#); [Mark 6:3](#))!

Essentially, they expected their Savior to validate everything they *already* believed. Rejecting any suggestion that they did not have it all figured out, their expectations kept them from seeing the Son of God when He appeared in their midst! Their expectations not only blinded them to the reality of Immanuel ("God with us"), but also caused them to persecute and ultimately kill this One who did not conform to their ideas.

This difficulty is not unique to the first century. A core part of everyone is his perspective, his mental map of [the world](#), the lens through which he sees everything. It develops over time, fashioned by environment, experience, education, and the culture at large. As a person ages, he continues to hone this lens, shaping it into what he believes is a more precise tool for viewing the world.

This happens naturally, as a result of our first parents' decision to take from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, as in Christ's time, problems arise when people use a carnal lens to view spiritual things. Only a very few at the time had a spiritual lens to see the Son of God for who He was. The remainder had only a carnal lens that distorted and perverted all that they perceived.

So it is today. Christ rebukes His [church of Laodicea](#) because its perception of reality—particularly about themselves—bears no resemblance to His own: "[Y]ou say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, *blind*, and naked" ( [Revelation 3:17](#)).

This spiritual blindness resembles the false expectations held by the people of Christ's time, with a notable exception: The members of His church have access to His Spirit—His mind, His heart, His perspective—and so should be free from much of the blindness that obstructs carnal man. They have the means to see more clearly. A more accurate lens is available to [Christians](#), which is why He says, "[A]noint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see" ( [Revelation 3:18](#)). Once God's Spirit has been given, the onus is on the blind to improve their own sight.

Today's church member may demonstrate this blindness in ways similar to the blind of Christ's time. It may come in the form of an unshakable belief that he alone has the whole counsel of God or is the primary focus of God's attention. It may show itself in a steady stream of criticism of the brethren—criticism that encompasses all but the self. It may manifest itself in a self-centeredness that assumes the spiritual high ground, believing that the rest of the church needs to rise to its level. All of these distortions spring from not seeing the self clearly—a result of not seeing God clearly.

The Bible gives two related principles regarding spiritual vision, particularly about being able to see God—and as we [see God](#) more clearly, our perception of all other spiritual matters will improve. First, [Jesus](#) tells us that the pure in heart—those without guile, pride, hypocrisy, envy, jealousy, competition, hidden anger, double-mindedness, or any other defilement of inward sin—will see God ( [Matthew 5:8](#)). In the same vein, [Hebrews 12:14](#) says that without holiness—God's consecration of us combined with our submission to His requirements for moral purity—one will not see God. Our spiritual vision will only be as good as our purity of mind *and* conduct. Any defilement will affect our spiritual sight, making it a never-ending challenge to see things as God sees them.

It is far easier to compile and rehearse the failings of others than it is to overcome in areas where we fall short of God's [holiness](#). Seeing through the

lens of unquestioned, untested, or unreliable expectations—about God, about prophecy, about our standing before Him, or the like—leaves us little better than those who failed to recognize their Creator when He came to them. Yet, applying ourselves to this purifying process will begin to allow us to see things from a perspective that approaches God's own.

- David C. Grabbe

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## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[Do You See God?](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

This powerful signature sermon examines the vital missing spiritual component in believing. Seeing doesn't necessarily lead to believing unless an active, productive, and trusting faith is added. The contemporaries of Moses and Jesus Christ experienced a plethora of awesome miracles, but did not believe, comprehend or understand. We see what we want, expect, or become educated to see. True wisdom (spiritual vision) comes from coupling human reason with revelation, reinforced by believing and practicing what God says or commands. Unless we acknowledge God's sovereign authority in our lives, following through with the things we learn from scripture, we, like functional atheists, will not see God.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[Recognizing the Second Witness](#)**

by Charles Whitaker

The law says a matter is established out of the mouth of two or three witnesses. Charles Whitaker contends this can also be two different trips or appearances by the same person. The second coming of Christ will be a second witness, and the same kinds of people will either accept or reject Him. Into which of these groups do you fit?

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