

Find Life in the Son: The Perilous Path of Unbelief John 12:37-50

Introduction

John 12:36

While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.

Jesus’ final words here underscore the reality that failing to believe in Him for whatever reason is not a neutral position with no consequence. It has huge consequences, not just far in the final judgment, but even now.

Jesus had been ministering to this crowd off and on for years now. Few if any that day realized that these words would be the last they would ever hear from Jesus in His public ministry. *No one ever knows when today’s opportunity is the last opportunity.*

These people had seen Jesus heal the blind and lame, and many of them had seen Him raise the dead or knew friends who had. They had heard Him teach as no other man had ever taught. Yet many if not most of them chose not to trust in Him for salvation. Some would eventually believe in Him as Savior and Lord, but many would never do so. This was a

close as they ever got. The path of unbelief is a perilous one. Whenever we encounter God's works and words we are brought into a time of crisis, of decision, of judgment, that impacts us, starting immediately.

37 Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, **38** so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

39 Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, **40** "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them."

41 Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. **42** Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; **43** for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

In verses 44-50 John summarizes the public preaching of Jesus to these people:

44 And Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. **45** And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. **46** I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me

may not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷ If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸ The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. ⁴⁹ For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”

1. Eyes: Unbelief in response to miracles from God produces blindness (37-40, 44-46)
2. Ears: Unbelief in response to words from God produces judgment (47-50).
3. Heart: Desire for glory from man more than glory from God produces fear (41-43).

1. Eyes: Unbelief in response to miracles from God produces blindness (37-40, 44-46)

³⁷ Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, ³⁸ so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

³⁹ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, ⁴⁰ “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their

eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.”

“Signs” are miracles that convey a divine message. Jesus did many signs before these very eyewitnesses, yet many of them did not believe in Him. This was no surprise to Jesus, nor did it thwart the plan of God. God had predicted through Isaiah many would respond to God’s revelation with unbelief. People would hear what God had given the prophets to reveal, but they would not believe. His arm of miraculous power was clear for all to see, but they did not turn from their sin and trust in Him. These words begin the famous Isaiah 53 passage that forecasts the suffering and death of the Messiah for the sins of His people. How fitting that John should remind us of that passage as he reports these last few days before Jesus is pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, pouring out his soul to death to bear the sin of many and to make intercession for transgressors.

Because they maintained their unbelief in the face of the signs Jesus performed, they became unable to believe. As Isaiah prophesied, God blinded their eyes and hardened their heart so that they could not see or understand and turn and be healed. This blindness and hardness was judgment

from God on their unbelief. Their day of opportunity was gone.

Leon Morris (quoted by MacArthur, 54): "He does not mean that the blinding takes place without the will, or against the will of these people These men chose evil. It was their own deliberate choice, their own fault. Make no mistake about that."

D. A. Carson (MacArthur, 54): "God's judicial hardening is not presented as the capricious manipulation of an arbitrary potentate cursing morally neutral or even morally pure beings, but as the holy condemnation of a guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen."

Jesus takes up the connection of seeing with believing again in verses 44-45:

44 And Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. **45** And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.

Those who responded in faith to what they saw Jesus do were responding not just to Jesus, God the Son, but to God the Father who sent Jesus into the world. God gave His unique Son. To refuse the Son was to refuse the God who sent Him. They are in perfect unity and harmony as members of the Trinity.

“Whoever sees me sees him who sent me.”
Jesus expressed this truth many times during
His public ministry:

John 5:19

The Son can do nothing of his own accord,
but only what he sees the Father doing. For
whatever the Father does, that the Son does
likewise.

John 7:16

My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me.

John 8:19

You know neither me nor my Father. If you
knew me, you would know my Father also.

John 8:42

If God were your Father, you would love me,
for I came from God and I am here. I came
not of my own accord, but he sent me.

John 10:37-38

³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father,
then do not believe me; ³⁸ but if I do them,
even though you do not believe me, believe
the works, that you may know and
understand that the Father is in me and I am
in the Father.

John 14:9

Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so
long, and you still do not know me,
Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the

Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

John 12:46

I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

Refusing the light keeps you in the dark. The darkness is not neutral. It continues to exercise power over you. But if you believe in Jesus the light, His light frees you from the power of darkness. Jesus is the light of life (John 1).

Most if not all the crowd that day believed that God existed, as do many today. But by rejecting Jesus they were rejecting the God who is for a god of their own imagination.

But what about those in other places and times including our own who don't believe in God at all?

We can at the very least say this. *If you don't believe in God you don't believe what the prophets, the apostles, or Jesus Christ Himself believed and bore testimony to.* So to be consistent with your worldview, you must hold them all to be at best mistaken and at worst liars.

They testify that they heard God speak. They testify that they saw God do miraculous works. Many of them did miracles themselves by the power of God. They believed not on some philosophical basis but on the basis of their own firsthand experience. Now, either someone played a huge trick on them all every time they thought they experienced a miracle or heard from God, or they are all bald-faced liars. Worse yet, since they declare that the eternal destiny of every human being on the planet depends on receiving as true what these witnesses have testified, they are horrible liars and frauds, nothing short of evil.

Are you willing to hold that view of Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Malachi, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, Matthew, John, and Jesus Christ Himself? What gives you cause to hold them in such low esteem? And what about the millions of human beings who have been transformed by the gospel that these witnesses proclaimed? Are they all deluded too? How much in-your-face reality are you willing to deny in order to maintain your unbelief? Is this not the very kind of blindness and hardness that John is talking about here?

If you harden your heart against revelation from God, He will harden your heart—just as He did with Pharaoh in the days of Moses and the exodus. You are too small to fight God successfully. It is by yielding to Him that you

are saved. If you continue to resist, you lose. He is either your Savior or your Judge. So believe while you can before the day comes that you can't.

Applications

- How well does your view of miracles match what Jesus says about them in this passage?
- If Jesus actually did no miracles, what would that say about Jesus and his apostles and the record of their testimony?
- When have you or others you know sensed that God was at work but resisted yielding to Him?

At the end of the chapter, Jesus moves from the works these people have seen to the words they have heard.

2. Ears: Unbelief in response to words from God produces judgment (47-50).

⁴⁷ If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸ The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. ⁴⁹ For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ And I know that his

commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”

It's not that Jesus will never fulfill His role as Judge, but that in His first coming Jesus came as Savior not as Judge.

John 3:16-17

16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

In His first coming, Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

But Jesus has already taught us that at the end of the age God the Father has committed all judgment to Him.

John 5:22-24

22 For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, **23** that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. **24** Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Those that hear the words of Christ and keep them, that is treasure them and respond with

faith in them, do not come into judgment. But those who refuse His words are judged by His words. *Denying that God exists does not make Him vanish. Refusing to believe the words of Christ does not make them untrue. They will come to pass whether you believe them or not.* They are self-fulfilling. They are spirit. They are life. They will save you or condemn you.

God will do exactly what Jesus has declared He will do. If you come into judgment because you never believed, you will have no one to blame for your eternal condemnation but yourself.

How many words of God have you heard over your lifetime? How many times have you shut your heart and mind and will to them? Those very words will condemn you. They will torment you forever.

Abraham says it this way to Dives, the rich man in hell, when he cried out for Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to testify to his brothers so that they would not suffer the burning hell he was suffering:

Luke 16:31

"He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

If this could be said of Moses and the prophets, how much more of the words of Jesus the Messiah? We have no excuse.

Jesus raised His own friend Lazarus from the dead, but many still did not believe even though Lazarus is walking around. Jesus' worst enemies did not deny the miracle. They just plotted to kill Lazarus too. Jesus Himself would rise from the dead, but many persisted in their unbelief.

Isaiah 55:6

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.

Don't wait till He has passed you by. Don't wait till you can no longer see and no longer hear and no longer believe.

Applications

- What words from Christ/God have been shared with you over your lifetime, and what would trusting and following what they teach look like?
- What words from Christ/God have you resisted or denied?
- If Jesus really said what John records here, and they are really true, what do you think He will say to you in final day of judgment?

3. Heart: Desire for glory from man more than glory from God produces fear (41-43).

⁴¹ Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. ⁴² Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

These verses fall between our accountability for the works of Jesus and our accountability for the words of Jesus. They give us insight into what was going on in the hearts of at least some of those who saw and heard Jesus. Often what appears to be the reaction of people is not where they actually are. The spirit of the times can be intimidating. It takes courage to buck the powers that be, whether they follow tradition or trend. What we learn here is that even among the authorities, who had taken a public stance against Jesus, there were many who actually did believe in Him. His works were undeniable and His words were convincing, but many were afraid to identify themselves as believers because it would cost them too much. They would be cast out of the synagogue (John 9). They would be excommunicated. Ostracized. Ridiculed. Persecuted. Jesus warned that His followers

would face this kind of hostility even from their own family members. There would be those who would think they were serving God by killing followers of Jesus. That's why Jesus declared you have to love Him even more than you love family, even more than you love your own life, or you're not worthy of Him. You don't understand the level of commitment Jesus deserves or the vast reward He gives.

Many in this group of partial believers never publicly gave allegiance to Jesus. Some, however, eventually found the courage to do so. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, for instance, who take care of Jesus' burial. If historical records are correct, they paid dearly for their loyalty to Jesus. But they are not sorry for it now, that's for sure.

Matthew 10:32-33

32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, **33** but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

How can we find the courage to identify with Jesus even when it may cost us friends, family, and even our very lives?

Matthew 10:28-31, 39

28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can

destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.
³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Isaiah saw the glory of the coming Messiah when the prophet saw Him in the temple the year that King Uzziah died. The glory of Yahweh was overwhelming. The glory Isaiah saw was the glory of the preincarnate Christ. It gave Isaiah courage to prophesy in the midst of a people who rejected his message. He valued the weightiness of God more than anything else. If historical tradition is correct, Isaiah paid with his life for his devotion.

Those who secretly believed in Jesus but would not publicly identify with Him had a heart issue that John identifies in verse 43: they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

What they loved, what they valued, what they desired drove their actions and their inaction. It is ever that way. *What you desire most—your affection of heart—will determine the choices you make. This is at the heart not only of unbelief, but of weak belief unwilling to be counted, unwilling to suffer, unwilling to*

fully commit whatever the cost—it is only partial trust, not saving faith. Not yet.

Maybe that's where you are. You're tracking toward Jesus, but you've stopped short of fully relying on Him because of what you fear it will cost you. You may be trying to keep control of your own life. A foolish trade. You don't control it anyway. You may be trying to keep or win favor with those who reject God and the Bible, family or friends. Who's to say that your coming to Jesus won't be part of what God uses to draw them too? Or you may just hate the idea that the current age will think you're backward and foolish for following Jesus. It won't be long before none of that will matter to you anymore. All that will matter is whether you trusted Jesus as your Savior and followed Him as your Lord. That will matter forever. And you'll be rejoicing forever that you belong to Him. Nobody in the heavenly city and nobody in the coming age of the new heavens and new earth will be sorry they followed Jesus. Not one.

Applications

- Proverbs 4 says that out of the heart are the issues of life. Where is your heart taking you?
- What are ways you show that you value the glory that comes from God more than what comes from man?

- What are ways you show you value man's glory more?

Conclusion

- So what power of the Lord have you seen? And what are you going to do with the eyewitness testimony of all the miracles Jesus did?
- What about this library of words from God we call the Bible, written over a span of 1,500 years by more than 40 authors from different continents, all testifying to one way of salvation, Jesus the Messiah?
- Where is your heart? What do you most desire? The glory and approval of God? Or are you settling for the fickle approval and glory that comes from human beings?

The path of unbelief is perilous. Believe today while you can. Tomorrow may be too late.

Closing Song: Reformation Hymn

Applications Summary

- How well does your view of miracles match what Jesus says about them in this passage?
- If Jesus actually did no miracles, what would that say about Jesus and his apostles and the record of their testimony?

- When have you or others you know sensed that God was at work but resisted yielding to Him?
- What words from Christ/God have been shared with you over your lifetime, and what would trusting and following what they teach look like?
- What words from Christ/God have you resisted or denied?
- If Jesus really said what John records here, and they are really true, what do you think He will say to you in final day of judgment?
- Proverbs 4 says that out of the heart are the issues of life. Where is your heart taking you?
- What are ways you show that you value the glory that comes from God more than what comes from man?
- What are ways you show you value man's glory more?

Concluding Summary

- So what power of the Lord have you seen? And what are you going to do with the eyewitness testimony of all the miracles Jesus did?
- What about this library of words from God we call the Bible, written over a span of 1,500 years by more than 40 authors from different continents, all testifying to one way of salvation, Jesus the Messiah?

- Where is your heart? What do you most desire? The glory and approval of God? Or are you settling for the fickle approval and glory that comes from human beings?