

A Theology of Unbelief

John 12:35–50

Studies in John #28

JESUS is about to die. He's entered Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday" to the acclaim as King, but in five days his exalted throne will be a cross. I've mentioned that things are slowing down in the Gospel as chapters 1–11 deal with three years of ministry while chapters 12 to the end deal with his final week. 11 chapters span 3 years; 10 deal with 7 days. You might have noticed that our pace of sermons has been slowing down too. The end of chapter 12 is Jesus' final public words to the crowds of his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters; after this his focus is on his disciples. It's really a sad story. It explains large-scale apostasy. Why is it that "the Word became flesh" and "c[o]m[ing] to his own, [but] his own people did not receive him" (1:14, 11)? It's A THEOLOGY OF UNBELIEF.

BELIEVE IN THE LIGHT (VV. 35–36)

Jesus has just proclaimed his impending death. Then the people raise an objection: "we've been taught by our rabbis that the Messiah lives forever." In other words, "you can't he be the Messiah." Jesus shows his unpredictability by not answering. Instead, he proclaims BELIEVE IN THE LIGHT.

Feel Jesus' urgency: "**The light is among you for a little while longer**" (v. 35). He's "the light of the world" (8:12) meaning the world is darkness or

lost in sin. And because he's soon to die and ascend, leaving this world, his call is to **“walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you.”** Then he says, **“The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going”** (v. 35). **Children**, if you've ever had to get up in the middle of the night but not in your own house, you know how lost you feel. You may have even bumped into something. Our problem as sinners, though, is that we're used to the darkness and find ways around in the darkness! Jesus concludes: **“While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light”** (v. 36). **Evangelism:** My friend, this world is darkened by sin and your sins have darkened your understanding. You cannot free yourself from this darkness; you cannot find God on your own. While Jesus is not here bodily, he's given us the light of his Word; he's given you Christians who, too, are the light of the world. And we say to you today, “Believe, follow Jesus, and he will lead you out of darkness into the light of eternity.” Believe, my friend, do not wait!

WHY SOME DON'T BELIEVE (VV. 37–43)

The focus of our passage and our time this morning is WHY SOME DON'T BELIEVE. If you've been here for these sermons through John you might be thinking, “Didn't we see this before?” Yes, we did back in 10:22–30 and I encourage you to re-listen to that sermon this week. **Application:** This repetition

bings up one of the interesting things about John's Gospel: certain themes recur again and again. Not only is it interesting because it shows the creativity of the Holy Spirit through John, but because it teaches us that we need to hear certain things again and again. One of the things I'm hearing a lot these days as a dad is "you've told me that already." Parents, sound familiar? Kids, how about you? My job as a dad is to prepare my kids to be adults so there are certain things I have to re-iterate over and over again. The Holy Spirit knows that we need to know that we must believe in Jesus but we also need to know why some don't believe. John gives us three reasons here.

First, *the scriptural reason*. Look at verse 37: **though** [Jesus] **had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him**. Then comes this important reason: **so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled** (v. 38). Circle that phrase **so that**. The Greek word ἵνα can be used to express the result of their unbelief was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy *or*—and this is how he's using it here—the prophecy was the reason for their unbelief. Do you see the difference? The first is saying these Jewish people's unbelief was just like that of their forefathers and foremothers in ages past. The latter is saying very strongly that the prophecy *necessitated* their unbelief. Here's why: look at the following verses. **Lord, who has believed**

what he heard from us (John is applying this to Jesus' words), **and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?** (John is applying this to Jesus' works in his signs). This comes right from Isaiah 53:1 where he's proclaiming that the Servant of the Lord would "sprinkle many nations" and "kings shall shut their mouths because of him," meaning, they'd be astonished as him and what he did (Isa. 52:15). Isn't that what we see in the "Greeks" who came to see Jesus (v. 20) and Jesus' promise that "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself?" (v. 31) Yet, as Isaiah 53:1 says, the Servant's own people would reject him! "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (1:11). Despite Jesus' **many signs...they still did not believe in him**. Why? **So that the word [of] the prophet...might be fulfilled** (v. 38). This is why John then says in verse 39: **therefore they could not believe**—οὐκ ἠδύναντο πιστεῦειν. They had no *dunamis*, no ability, no power, no way in and of themselves to believe in Jesus. Why? Scripture prophesied it.

The second reason why some don' believe is *the theological reason*. John quotes from Isaiah 6:10. Note how he introduces it: **for**. That little word gives us the reason. The reason for what? Why those who did not believe in Jesus **could not believe** (v. 39): "**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” (v. 40). Isaiah 6 is where the prophet was willing to speak for the Lord but the Lord said his preaching would have no effect; in fact, through his preaching his hearers’ eyes would be blinded and their hearts would be hardened. Here’s the big question: in the context of Isaiah 6, who was doing the blinding and hardening? The Lord! How about in John 12? Who’s the *he* of Isaiah 6:10? **Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him** (v. 41). Who’s *he* (v. 40) who blinded and hardened? Who’s the *his* (v. 41) and *him* (v. 41) whose glory Isaiah saw in the temple? The context shows that it’s Jesus! “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (1:14). Why don’t some believe? Because the Son of God now, as then, blinds and hardens.

Application: I gotta pause here. This is super *strong* language, isn’t it? What’s your natural inclination? “That’s not fair! This makes people robots!” But what do you see here in the context? God’s sovereignty is not pitted against our responsibility. Alongside this strong language of God’s sovereignty in blinding and hardening is the unbelievers’ culpability—**they still did not believe in him** (v. 37)—and among those who professed to believe but were afraid to say so openly, it was because their hearts **loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God** (v. 43). In other words,

God's blinding of eyes and hardening of hearts is not a capricious act on morally neutral or innocent people; in fact, it's God's response to their actual sins.

What does this mean for us? From our vantage point, we don't know if a person has been blinded and hardened forever or temporarily. All we know is that our God is so sovereign that he can blind and he can open eyes, he can harden and he can soften hearts, he can reject sinners and he can accept them. And it's in his sovereignty that we find hope for everyone we know who looks to us to be blinded and hardened to the Gospel—our God alone change hearts! In fact, later in Isaiah's prophecy, knowing this, he cries out:

Look down from heaven and see...where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion...you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants (Isa. 63:15, 16, 17).

The third reason why some don' believe is *the sinful reason*. **Nevertheless**, verse 42 goes on to say, **many even of the authorities believed in him**. Don't get too far ahead of yourselves, though, as John adds this: **but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it** (v. 42). Their faith was not a public faith. Why not? **So that they would not be put out of the synagogue** (v. 42). Why were they concerned about that? **For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God** (v. 43). This takes us all the

way back to a theme we saw in chapter 2 after Jesus turned water into wine and cleansed the temple: there are various kinds of faith, temporary and permanent, fearful and full-fledged, false and true. Even though “many believed in [Jesus] when they saw the signs that he was doing...Jesus...did not entrust himself to them” (2:23, 24). Here in John 12 the emphasis is on the sinful hearts of those who “believe” but who really don’t.

A FINAL PUBLIC PLEA TO BELIEVE (VV. 44–50)

I said God’s sovereignty is not pitted against our responsibility. This is demonstrated in a powerful way at the end in verses 44–50. Before Jesus focuses privately on his disciples in his final days before his death, he issues A FINAL PUBLIC PLEA TO BELIEVE. **Jesus cried out**—ἐκράξεν, a strong verb we’ve seen before denoting proclamatory, prophetic speech: **“Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me”** (v. 44). Note that faith in Jesus *is* faith in God. How stronger can Jesus say to our Jehovah’s Witness friends that he’s God? Then Jesus says something that will come up again in chapter 14: **“whoever sees me sees him who sent me”** (v. 45). “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father...No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (1:14, 18). Jesus re-iterates what he said at the beginning of this narrative: **“I**

have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (v. 46). Come to Jesus; come to God the Father; come to the Holy Spirit, the one true God who is light and who leads out of darkness!

Yet, as this entire narrative has explained, not all will do this. To them Jesus says, **“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. 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”** (vv. 47–48). That’s not me saying this; that’s Jesus. And Jesus is not saying this just as some random, mentally ill person you might hear down at the beach: **“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. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me”** (vv. 49–50).

My friends, in this story Jesus is about to die. As we read it, he has. He died on behalf of sinners because God must punish sin. He rose again to demonstrate that God accepted his sacrifice. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ that I proclaim to you today is this simple: God saves sinners. Believe it!