

THEY COULD NOT BELIEVE

John 12:37-43 (No. 68)

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

May 27, 2018

INTRODUCTION

The Apparent Failure of Jesus' Ministry

Up to this point in the Gospel of John, Jesus' ministry appears to be a spectacular failure. He came from heaven to earth on a mission from the Father to the people of Israel. He came to his own people, who anticipated the arrival of the Messiah and were privileged to possess God's special revelation identifying the Messiah. He fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah just as they were written centuries before. He taught like no teacher of Israel ever taught, confounding the experts and demonstrating a greater understanding of God's Law than any who had ever come before him. Everything he ever said was true; nothing was proven false. He performed miracles greater than even those in the Old Testament and did signs that only God could do. Every miracle he did had witnesses and could not be disputed. He even claimed to be the Christ, the Son of Man, and the Son of God. Everything he said and did supported those claims. Yet most of Israel did not believe in him and the Jewish religious leaders, who out of all people should have been most ready to receive him given their knowledge of the Scriptures, rejected him.

A minor chord that rings throughout the first 12 chapters of John's Gospel is the rejection of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Even at the end of the book, he has only a small band of faithful followers who believe in him. Jews in decades and centuries that followed used this as evidence that Jesus wasn't the Christ—after all, why didn't the Jews of his time believe in him?

Why Was He Rejected?

That's an important question for us to understand. Why *did* the Jews reject him? Here at the end of chapter 12, we learn why. John explains the reason why the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah.

As we discover why the Jews rejected him, the reason is not easy to accept because we find that the decisive factor in whether someone—Jew or Gentile—rejects Jesus is out of our hands. Yet, at the same time, anyone who rejects Jesus is solely responsible for their unbelief and they are guilty before God because of it. So we'll see in our passage two joint reasons for the Jews' unbelief.

Text

John 12:35–43: "So Jesus said to them, "The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. 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. Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, 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?" Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "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." Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. 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; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God."

Context

Jesus' final invitation to Israel to believe in him are found in verses 35 and 36. These are his last words of instruction to unbelieving Israel. After he departed and hid himself from the crowd, he never again made a public appearance to teach. From this point on, his ministry was only to his disciples.

The next time he surfaced in public, he was arrested, put on trial, and crucified. But his public ministry was over after these words. When he rose from the dead, he appeared only to believers. So feel the weight of his final invitation in these verses. This is his last appeal to unbelieving Israel to believe in him. His message is that they must believe in him while there is still time. This is an urgent call. Time was running out. God is patient, but his patience with sinners ends. After that comes judgment. So while the Light of the world was still present, they must believe in him and follow him before the judgment of darkness came.

So it is with everyone who hears the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is this: Jesus came to take away the sins of the world by dying on a cross on our behalf to satisfy the wrath of God and save us from our sins. All who turn from their sin and trust in Christ to save them will be saved. This truth about Jesus is always urgent because only God knows when his patience with the unbelieving will come to an end. For some, it ends when they die. For others, it ends before they die, when God seals their judgment by taking away the light of truth from them so that spiritual darkness forever overtakes them. Regardless, those who do not trust in Christ will face eternal judgment.

Therefore, everyone who is without Christ must believe in him without delay. God's judgment on those who refuse his invitation to be saved is always just around the corner.

Persistent Unbelief

Israel was privileged to see the light of the truth in a way no one else had before. Jesus came to *them* and proved that he was the Son of God by his teaching and his miracles—by his words and works. But they persistently rejected him.

He healed a man disabled for 38 years, yet they would not believe. He fed 5,000 men plus women and children by miraculously multiplying five loaves and two fish, yet they stubbornly refused to trust him. He gave sight to a man born blind, yet they would not see that he was God. He raised a man from the dead, yet their dead hearts would not accept him. Despite all the evidence and repeated invitations to believe, they would not.

Verse 37 says, “Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.”

The tense of the verb “did not believe” reveals the persistence in their stubborn refusal to believe, they repeatedly failed to believe. Why not? Why wouldn’t Israel believe in Jesus? What is the cause of persistent unbelief?

John gives two answers, each supported by a passage in Isaiah.

I. THE SOVEREIGN WILL OF GOD

The first answer found in verses 38-39 is that the Jews rejected Jesus because of the sovereign will of God. John writes that the Jews still did not believe in Jesus (v. 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?’” Here, he quotes Isaiah 53:1, written about 700 years before Jesus came to earth. It was a time when Israel had again turned its back on God and was walking in persistent unbelief.

In chapters 52 and 53, Isaiah prophesied of the coming Messiah and he asked two rhetorical questions, which John quotes. The first was, “Who has believed what he heard from us?” That is, who among them believed the message of God? Who trusted the words of God?

The second question was, “To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” The “arm of the Lord” is a figure of speech for the power and strength of God. In other words, Isaiah asked, who has believed the words and works of God? To Israel, God had revealed his message and his works. But who believed God? The answer in his day was almost no one.

So John quotes this passage because the same thing was going on during the days of Jesus’ ministry. Virtually no one in Israel was believing the words and works of the God as revealed in Jesus. So Isaiah prophesied the widespread rejection of God even in Jesus’ day. The Jews’ rejection of Jesus fulfilled this prophecy.

But John says something else about this prophecy that we shouldn't miss. Not only does their rejection fulfill this Scripture, but because this prophecy is God's prophecy, their rejection also fulfilled God's plan. The prophecy is God's plan—that's what makes it a prophecy. Twice, John makes it plain that their rejection was planned by God.

He begins verse 38 with the very important words, "so that. . ." The Jews still didn't believe in Jesus "*so that* the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. . ." In other words, their rejection of Jesus had a purpose. Then, following the quotation, he begins verse 39, "*Therefore* they could not believe." Other versions translate verse 39, "*For this reason*, they could not believe."

They couldn't believe because their unbelief was *designed* to fulfill Scripture. It's not that their rejection of Jesus *happened* to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy; it's that their unbelief was *purposed* in the plan of God to fulfill prophecy. The sovereign will of God was at work even in their unbelief.

So Israel's rejection of Jesus didn't catch God by surprise. It was part of God's sovereign plan. What could be the plan of God in Israel's unbelief? Simply this: Israel's unbelief occurred in order for Jesus to fulfill his mission.

What was Jesus' mission? He came to make atonement for our sins so that we could be saved by believing in him. The only way for our sins to be atoned for was to offer a sacrifice great enough to pay our punishment in full. The only sacrifice great enough was for God himself to become a man and receive our punishment from God the Father. Therefore, Jesus, the Son of God, would have to die on behalf of sinners.

So he came to earth to die for us. That's exactly what Jesus said he would do in verse 32: "When I am lifted up, [I] will draw all people to myself." In the wisdom of God, Israel rejected Jesus, ensuring that he would be killed and that salvation would come to the whole world by grace alone and not because of works or ethnicity.

So, the first reason for the Jews' rejection of Jesus is the sovereign will of God. Israel's rejection of God didn't thwart his plans, but fulfilled his plans. God planned it in order that salvation would come to the whole world through Jesus' death. And still today, no one's rejection of Jesus takes God by surprise. He is always working his sovereign will out even when people reject him.

So people reject Jesus because of the sovereign will of God. Why, then, are sinners still held guilty for their unbelief, if they're carrying out the plan of God in their unbelief? The answer is because their unbelief is willing unbelief. They reject Jesus willingly.

That leads us to the second reason for unbelief: the stubborn will of man.

II. THE STUBBORN WILL OF MAN

John writes in verses 39-40, “Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, “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.”

Notice that John quotes Isaiah again; this time 6:10. Just as he did previously, this quote gives us the second reason why the Jews could not believe. “They could not believe. *For. . .*” And the reason given is that God has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so that they couldn’t believe.

Now, those of you who love the doctrines of God’s sovereignty in salvation might immediately assume this is referring to the doctrine of election—the truth that God chooses to save whomever he wants, not on the basis of any foreseen faith or good deeds, but solely on the basis of his desire. Those he doesn’t choose are passed over and are not saved. Those are precious truths—difficult truths—but that’s not what’s going on here.

This is God hardening their heart in response to their stubborn refusal to believe in him. That’s the context of Isaiah 6. There, the Lord commissions Isaiah to take his message to the stiff-necked, rebellious people of Israel, who had rejected his word and refused to trust and obey him. The result would be that, as Isaiah preached to them, the Lord would blind their eyes and harden their hearts. Isaiah’s preaching would be the Lord’s instrument to seal their unbelief as he caused them to be spiritually blind and hard-hearted.

They would be unable to turn back to the Lord once Isaiah preached to them. Had Israel been willing to obey the Lord, he would have received them and healed them. But they were unwilling, so he hardened their heart in judgment.

This was the same situation in Jesus’ day. Jesus came, preached to them, and showed them signs. He did this for three years out in the open and before the Jews from Galilee to Judea and even beyond. Yet they persistently rejected him. They stubbornly refused to believe in Jesus. They didn’t want to believe in Jesus.

So what was God’s response? God judged them by hardening their hearts so that they could not believe. His patience with them ran out. Notice that in verse 37, they *would* not believe despite the signs. But in verse 39, they *could* not believe. Their “will not” led to their “cannot.” Pastor MacArthur summarizes, “When they would not believe, the judgment came, and they could not believe.” God judicially sealed their unbelief by blinding their eyes and hardening their hearts as a result of their stubborn unbelief.

This isn’t about election, this is about judgment. This was judicial hardening. Hardening their hearts because of their refusal to believe. Sealing them in the cage of their spiritual darkness. Turning them over to the consequences of their wickedness. Rejecting them in response to their rejection of him.

Their unbelief was inexcusable. They had every reason to believe in Jesus. But they would not. Therefore, God moved so that they could not. In punishment, he sealed their unbelief by judicially hardening their hearts so that believing in Jesus was impossible. That's what "could not believe" means—total impossibility. The only one who could save them would not do so. So the second reason for their unbelief was that God hardened their heart in response to their stubborn will.

Now, why did John quote Isaiah? Isaiah 53 isn't the only place in the Old Testament that reports the widespread unbelief of Israel. Isaiah 6 isn't the only place in the Old Testament that God hardens the hearts of sinners.

Verse 41 gives us the reason why John quoted Isaiah and these two passages in particular: "Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him." Who is "him"? Jesus. John says that Isaiah in some sense saw the glory of Jesus and, when he wrote these passages, he was writing of Jesus. So in verse 38, where John quotes Isaiah 53, the words and works that the Jews rejected in Isaiah's day prophesied the words and works of Jesus that the Jews would reject in Jesus' day.

And in verse 40, where John quotes Isaiah 6, the Lord who blinds their eyes and hardens their hearts is Jesus himself. His own preaching and miracle-working was the instrument of his own judgment on them.

John closes this section with an additional comment that is at the same time hopeful, yet discouraging. Even as John tells us that the Lord judicially hardened Israel, he indicates that not quite every Jew had been hardened. Some might yet be saved. In fact, there were still some who believed in Jesus, even if their belief wasn't saving belief.

Verse 42-43: "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; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God."

At first, it sounds hopeful. *Many* even of the authorities—that is, many of the common Jews as well as those in leadership—believed in him. But! And John has shown us throughout this book that we must beware of superficial belief, because not all belief in Jesus is saving belief. There is a kind of belief in Jesus that doesn't save. It is head belief not heart belief. It is attracted to Jesus for his gifts, but has not submitted to him. At some level, these Jews believed in Jesus—perhaps believing that he was the Christ. But their belief in him didn't cause them to follow after him and subject themselves to him. They wouldn't yet fully believe and obey him. What held them back was the fear of being put out of the synagogue by the Pharisees. Their fears weren't unfounded. In chapter 9, they cast out of the synagogue the man born blind who Jesus healed and who believed in him.

But these Jews weren't willing to lose their religion, their status, and their relationships in order to follow Jesus. Sadly, they valued the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. They would rather have man's praise, than God's praise. They would rather be esteemed by man, than esteemed by God. They would rather live right in man's sight, than live right in God's

sight. But remember what Jesus said in 5:44, “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” In other words, you can’t. You can’t believe if you seek man’s praise over God’s praise. Furthermore, if you are unwilling to confess Jesus publicly, then you do not believe in him savingly.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:32-33: “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

So what can we say about these many who believed in Jesus? Their belief wasn’t yet saving belief. They weren’t yet hardened, but they weren’t yet saved either.

CONCLUSION

We have one more paragraph to go before we’ve finished chapter 12, but these verses essentially close the first section of John’s Gospel. The section began in 1:11 with John foreshadowing that Jesus would be rejected: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” The section ends here with the full rejection of Israel and God turning them over to their stubborn unbelief by hardening their hearts to the Truth and blinding their eyes to the Light.

Who has God hardened so that belief is forever impossible? Only God knows. But for many (I think: most), the offer of salvation remains available. Judgment for unbelief has not yet come. There is yet the opportunity to trust in Christ for salvation. So the urgency of Jesus’ invitation to believe is timely. If you haven’t yet believed in Jesus, go on and put your whole trust in him today. Don’t harden your heart to him. Rather, as Isaiah wrote in 55:6, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.”