

John 12: Surrendered or Self-Serving

Understanding Unbelief

John 12.37-43

Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet:

*“Lord, who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”* 53.1

For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: “

*He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts,
so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts,
nor turn—and I would heal them.”* 6.10

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.

Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; *for they loved human praise more than praise from God.*

But despite all the miracles he had done, most of the people would not believe he was the Messiah. This is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted:

“Lord, who will believe us?

Who will accept God’s mighty miracles as proof?”

But they couldn’t believe, for as Isaiah also said:

*“God has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts
so that they can neither see nor understand
nor turn to me to heal them.”*

Isaiah was referring to Jesus when he made this prediction, for he had seen a vision of the Messiah’s glory. However, even many of the Jewish leaders believed him to be the Messiah but wouldn’t admit it to anyone because of their fear that the Pharisees would excommunicate them from the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Revelation and Unbelief

Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: “Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

“You have seen with your own eyes everything the Lord did in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to his whole country—all the great tests of strength, the miraculous signs, and the amazing wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you minds that understand, nor eyes that see, nor ears that hear!

DEUTERONOMY 29.2-4

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.

DEUTERONOMY 29.29

- ❖ The public ministry of Jesus has ended and John gives this summary statement: *Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.*

- ❖ What is the explanation for this discrepancy between revelation and unbelief? How can people remain unbelieving in the face of indisputable evidence? How could they not believe in spite of all that they had seen?

Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.

JOHN 14.11

- ❖ “Belief” is the key word in John’s Gospel (e.g. 3.16, 36; 5.24; 6.29). Unbelief, however, was more characteristic of people’s response to the words and works of Jesus. To explain this discrepancy between evidence and unbelief, the Holy Spirit directed John’s attention to words of Isaiah, quoted also by the Apostle Paul:

And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written:

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (52.7)

But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says,

“Lord, who has believed our message? (53.1)

ROMANS 10.15-16

Unable to Believe

For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.”

- ❖ How do we understand the words of Isaiah, referenced by both John and Paul to explain the astounding unbelief of the Jews? Does God actually blind eyes and harden hearts to His revelation of truth? Did the unbelief of people result in the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy or was Isaiah’s prophecy the reason why they did not believe? This passage from Isaiah is quoted three times in the New Testament and is understood as a judicial act by God (as also is God acting to justify sinners).
- ❖ There are several key truths for us to understand—
 - ▶ Spiritual blindness is supernatural in nature and the ability to see and understand spiritual truth is likewise supernatural (2 Corinthians 4.4, 6).

- ▶ Belief is not whimsical, naturally discerned, or self-initiated, but initiated by God and prompted by divine revelation (see Isaiah 65.1*; Romans 10.17; Ephesians 2.8-9).
- ▶ As justification is by faith, so also hardening is by unbelief. Both are judicial acts of God but are inseparable from human action and responsibility.

*All day long I have held out My hands to an obstinate people,
who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations —
a people who continually provoke Me to My very face . . .*

*I will destine you for the sword,
and all of you will fall in the slaughter;
for I called but you did not answer,
I spoke but you did not listen.
You did evil in My sight
and chose what displeases Me.”*

ISAIAH 65.2*-3a, 12

* Also quoted in Romans 10.20, 21

- The rejection of Jesus by the Jews was part of God's sovereign plan to accomplish the salvation of "whosoever believes."

"Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

ACTS 2.22-23

- The Apostle Paul devoted three chapters in Romans to the rejection of the Jews and the salvation of the Gentiles, addressing God's foreknowledge, sovereignty, and election; His rejection, hardening, and grace. He concluded by saying:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in . . . Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out!

ROMANS 11.25, 33

Isaiah's Vision

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.

1 PETER 1.10-11

- ❖ What did Isaiah see that revealed the glory of Jesus? When did he have this revelation and what did he speak? No one in the Old Testament were given more revelation about both the suffering (e.g Psalm 22; Isaiah 53) and the glory of the Messiah than David and Isaiah. It is generally accepted that John's statement is a reference to Isaiah's vision in chapter 6: *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne . . .*

❖ In his prologue, John stated:

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (P¹⁸)

Thus, by definition, visible manifestations (known as a “theophany”) in the Old Testament of the holy unseen God were, in reality, manifestations of the Logos, the Word (John 1.1, 14). Isaiah saw Jesus in all of his pre-incarnate glory, “the glory [he] had with [the Father] before the world began” (John 17.5).

❖ In chapter 53, Isaiah wrote with graphic detail of the atoning, sacrificial work of God’s *Suffering Servant*—“the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.” Isaiah’s prophetic descriptions will find their perfect fulfillment in the efficacious death of Jesus (see John 3.14-15; 12.32-33) and their ultimate application in the theology of the apostles as they describe “our great salvation.”

Halfway Belief

Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God.

Fear of man will prove to be a snare . . .

PROVERBS 29.25

“Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

DEUTERONOMY 6.4-5

- ❖ “Yet”—there were those who believed, “but . . .” What is John’s point in telling us that there were Jews who truly believed—only to also tell us that their faith was fear-bound and irredeemably compromised? Remember that this chapter is about “surrender or self-serving.” Here is another manifestation of a self-serving heart: *“they cared more for human approval than for God’s glory.”* (MSG)

❖ What is the value to John's concluding words in his excursus on unbelief?

Remember that Jesus commended churches in Asia and then said, *"But I have this against you. . . . Repent!"* A faith that does not lead to a full surrender of one's life to completely identify with Jesus is ultimately worthless.

"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."

MATTHEW 10.32-33

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed.

HEBREWS 4.1-2

Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

1 JOHN 2.22-23