

A Theology of Unbelief

John 12:35-50

BI: It is a terrifying thing to consider that one day “I will not believe” may become “I cannot believe.”

As we learned last week, we are now coming to the end of Jesus’ public ministry. In the passage before us Jesus is offering his final public address before the crucifixion, which will be upon him in less than a week. As we read His words one of the things that strikes me about Jesus is His amazing patience. He has now been ministering publically for 3 years. He has performed so many miracles and did so many wonderful things that John will end his Gospel by saying that “if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written” (21:25). Nevertheless, after all the teaching, and all the miracles, and all the amazing answers he gave to impossible questions people still would not believe. And yet, even here at the end of His ministry you don’t pick up any tone of frustration in Jesus’ words and He is still inviting them to believe and become children of light and children of God.

The narrative before us this morning begins with the agony of Jesus’ realization that His “hour” had come. Soon He would be crucified. So he asks the rhetorical question (27) “what shall I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

In the next verse then, we hear the Father speak from the sky, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again.” This prompts the questions, How would God be glorified in the crucifixion? Well we learned last week that the Father would be glorified in the cross in three ways (31-32),

- A. His cross would bring judgment upon the world.
- B. His cross would guarantee that the Satan would be cast out.
- C. His cross would be the means by which Jesus would draw all kinds of people from all over the world to Himself.

So the first thing we saw last week was The Glory of the Cross. Second we heard The call to Faith.

You will remember that the people demanded an explanation. They understood that when Jesus said (32) he would be “lifted up” He was using a metaphor to describe crucifixion. That was confusing, to say the least. They understood that the Messiah was to reign forever. So they pressed Jesus for an answer. In response, however, Jesus invites them once again to believe (35), “For a little longer you have the light. Walk in the light... (36) believe in the light so that you may become sons of light.” “Walking in the light” means to “believe in the light.”

What was the light? The light was the very life of God personified in Jesus Christ. He is the light. And to believe in Him makes one a son of light, or child of light. And those who represent God in Christ to this world are referred to by Jesus in these terms, “You are the light of the world.” And Paul says that in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation you appear as lights in the world (Phil. 2:15).

Here is Jesus’ amazing patience. Even though they reject Him. Even though they are planning to kill Him, He continues to invite them to come and receive the salvation God offers to them in Christ. But they will not believe. And we see this explicitly stated in verse 37, “But though he had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him.” This raises the question, why would they not believe?

We have seen the Glory of the Cross. We have heard The Call to Faith. Now John offers us a Theology of Unbelief.

III. Theology of Unbelief:

1. The fact that the very people who have been appointed to accept Messiah actually rejected Him needed explanation and it comes now right at the end of Jesus’ public ministry.¹
2. First the difficulty is described (37): “Though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they did not believe in Him.” As Jesus had said earlier (3:2; 9:32) His teaching and miracles had not been done in a corner. Everyone saw them. Everyone knew about them. And yet, it did not result in belief.
3. The question is, “Does the people’s unbelief thwart the plan of God?” The answer is, No. Their unbelief doesn’t undermine God’s sovereign plan; it confirms it. Why? Because this is exactly what God said would happen.

Read 38-40

4. John reminds us that the unbelief of the people living when Messiah came fulfilled the prediction of the prophet Isaiah. The prophecy cited (Isa. 53:1) speaks both of failure to believe and of a revelation of “the arm of the Lord” (a reference to God’s acts of power and miracles). In other words, even though God moved in power with many miraculous signs, people did not believe. In their case it was a message of coming judgment – Babylon would come and destroy Jerusalem.
5. Pay attention to the frightening sequence here. In v 37 we learn that they did not believe. Then in v. 39 we learn that “they could not believe.” I don’t think the order is an accident. First they chose not to believe and then they could not believe.

¹ Robertson Nichole, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament Vo. 1*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company), 812

6. Jesus had just said a few verses ago (31), “Now judgment is upon this world.” I think this is the beginning of God’s judgment. At first, they didn’t believe, and didn’t believe, and didn’t believe. Then, God moved in judgment so that they couldn’t believe. God had judicially blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts because they refused to believe in him (cf. Ex. 9:12; cf. 2 Thes. 2:8-12).²

7. Leon Morris notes, “When John quotes ‘he hath blinded their eyes...’ he does not mean the blinding takes place without the will, or against the will of the people... these men chose evil. It was their own deliberate choice, their own fault.”³

8. Likewise, D.A Carson adds, ‘God’s judicial hardening is not presented as a capricious manipulation of an arbitrary potentate cursing morally neutral or even morally pure beings, but as a holy condemnation of a guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen.’⁴ (Mac. 54).

9. If you read the book of Exodus you will discover that on at least 8 occasions it says Pharaoh hardened his heart, and on at least 9 occasions it says God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

10. As MacArthur so eloquently said, “It is a sobering reality that those who persistently harden their hearts against God may find themselves hardened by Him.”⁵ (cf. Pharaoh Rom. 9). “They were not believing in Him and then “The could not believe in Him.”

11. When Isaiah says “they could not believe” and “God blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them,” he was speaking of the sovereign purposes of God.

12. One of the things we need to know about the unbelief that Isaiah predicted is that God is sovereign even over unbelief. He was doing something through the people’s unbelief. You might say, “What good can possibly come out of unbelief?” Well, let’s think about what God accomplished through the unbelief of the Jews in Jesus’ day.

- Jesus was crucified. Their unbelieving plan did not thwart the purposes of God. It accomplished it. Isaiah himself wrote of the suffering Savior (Isa. 53:3-10). It was by the suffering of Messiah that He would bear our sins in His body on the cross. But such suffering could only come through rejection leading to crucifixion. Yes, each of those men was culpable for their own unbelief, and yet God sovereignly planned for their unbelief to accomplish His mission of saving the world.

² Tom Constable quoting Warren Weirsbe in Tom Constable, “Notes on John,” *Dr. Constable’s Notes*, Sonic Light, <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/john.pdf>, (accessed April23, 2015).

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John Revised Edition*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995), 537

⁴ John MacArthur, *MacArthur N.T. Commentary – John 12-21*, (Moody, 2008), 54

⁵ *Ibid*,

- God established the church. God's plan had always been to give His Son a bride, a group of people to great number who would worship and adore Him forever. But He could only do that through the cross.
- Sent the Gospel to the Nations: Rom. 11:11-12 "By their (Jew's) transgression salvation has come to the gentiles. By their transgression riches come to the world." This was all part of the plan. God was even accomplishing His sovereign purposes through their unbelief.
- Eventually, Israel will be Saved. Rom. 11:26, When the fullness of the Gentils is complete, "All Israel will be saved."

13. God truly is sovereign over all things. He is working "all things after to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). But that doesn't mean we are not responsible for our unbelief. We are responsible. We must choose to either believe in Jesus (which includes repentance – a change of heart that results in a change of thinking and behavior), or to reject Him. And the consequences of that decision will be the difference between eternal life with God or eternal death in hell. Luke 17:1 Jesus "said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come!"

14. When Isaiah wrote these words (Isa, 6, 53, etc), he wrote them because He knew how glorious Messiah was. (Read v. 41). In Isaiah 6, when he saw the Lord in the temple seated on the throne... that was none other than the second Person of the Trinity, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Christ. Isaiah saw His glory and spoke of Him so that we would know and so we would be warned not to remain in unbelief.

15. We have seen The Glory of the Cross, The Call to Faith, the Theology of Unbelief, and now...

IV. The Danger of a Divided Heart:

Read 12:41-43

1. I believe that when we come to these verses John is still speaking of unbelief, but it is the unbelief of some who say they believe. Not everyone rejected Jesus outright. Even some of the rulers "believed" in Him, but they wouldn't confess Him for two reasons:

- A. They feared what men could take away from them.
 - a. They could be thrown out of the synagogue.
- B. They loved what men could give to them.
 - a. They loved the doxa of men rather than the doxa of God (ESV gets this right).

2. These men said they believed, but I suspect they were like others in the gospel of John who had only a superficial faith.

- A. Jn. 2:23 “Many believed in His name because of the signs miracles they saw him perform. But Jesus did not entrusted himself to them because He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concern man, for He himself knew what was in man.” (Jesus didn’t believe in them)
- B. Jn. 6:66, “Many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with him any more.” (“Eat my flesh and drink my blood”)
- C. Likewise, Judas waked with Jesus for 3 years and certainly professed many times that He believed, but in the end he too went away.
- D. Jn. 5:44 “How can you believe when you receive glory from one another but do not receive the glory of God?

3. When John says that some of the rulers believed in Jesus, it serves to illustrate the problem of superficial, non-saving faith. False faith. James will call it “demon faith” (even demons “believe” but they tremble). “These didn’t want to be alienated by the Pharisees. They would rather risk being alienated by God.”⁶ Oh my friend, DON'T RISK BEING ALIENATED BY GOD!

4. These men loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God. So at the end of the day, even the rulers who claimed to believe in Jesus were not really His disciples. Theirs was a gentle rejection, but a rejection nonetheless. And this was the theme of Jesus’ ministry. More people would reject that believe. This is the glory of the rejected and crucified Christ. And this is where Jesus’ public ministry ends

5. So we have seen the Glory of the Cross; the Call to Faith; the Theology of Unbelief, the Danger of a Divided Heart, and finally...

V. The Epilogue of Jesus’ Public Ministry:

1. The last several verses of the chapter serve as an epilogue to Jesus ministry. Many scholars believe that John inserted this final declaration of Jesus as a summary of His mission and ministry. In it, here is what we find.

- A. (44-46) If you believe in me you believe in the Father and you are saved from eternal Darkness.
- B. (47-48) If you reject me, God’s word will testify against you at the judgment.
- C. (49-50) If you believe in me, God’s word brings you eternal life. The consequence of believing is eternal life.

2. Let’s close this passage by reading this final text.

Read. 12:44-50

⁶ MacArthur

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