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John 11:45-53 “The Choice Between Unbelief and Belief”

Intro. Last Sunday I shared with you concerning the great miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. He had been dead for 4 days, and yet, Jesus raised him from the dead and he walked out of that tomb alive! This was a dynamic expression of divine power. And what is as amazing as the miracle itself is the fact that many still refused to believe in Jesus in spite of such a great miracle seen by many witnesses!

The rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leadership is highlighted by John more than any other Gospel account. From the very beginning of this gospel, John points out the reality of the unbelief & rejection of Jesus Christ, especially by the religious leaders. As John introduces his gospel account to us, he prepares us regarding the fact that Jesus would be rejected. In John 1:11 he states, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.” Though some truly believed in Jesus, most responded to Christ with indifference, unbelief, or outright hatred. This was in spite of the fact that Jesus performed so many miracles, most of which were acts of mercy. And so with our text today, we move into the section of John dealing with the final and complete rejection of Jesus Christ by the leaders and the nation of Israel. This rejection culminates in the crucifixion of Christ on the cross.

Now each of us has to consider the problem of unbelief on the part of so many. If fact, unbelief and even atheism are on the rise in our society. I’m sure most of you in my audience are believers. But you may have a family member or friend that is an unbeliever, and you just don’t understand why. They may claim there isn’t enough evidence to believe in Jesus. But many of the same people who witnessed the miracles of Jesus did not believe in Him. So the question is, “Is unbelief due to a lack of evidence, or is unbelief due to other reasons?”

In our text today we are going to answer that question. So first of all, I want to challenge you to:

I. UNDERSTAND THE TRUE NATURE OF UNBELIEF

Suppose I could go out and gather 12 unbelievers and I say to them, “Why do you not believe in Jesus Christ?” Some may say, “Jesus is a myth created by the church.” Others may say, “I don’t believe in Jesus because there are too many hypocrites in the church.” They may give other reasons. Yet I want to give some of the real reasons for unbelief in reference to Jesus.

Now let’s see the background for our topic our Scripture text. In v.45 we are told that many believed in Jesus after witnessing the great miracle Jesus performed. But in v.46 we see that some did not believe. They didn’t even bother to find a plausible explanation for the miracle. Instead, they just ran to inform the Pharisees of what Jesus had done. Then, beginning in v.47 we read of another group of unbelievers. The word translated “council” is *sunedrion*, and probably refers to an official gathering of the Sanhedrin, the great ruling council at Jerusalem, consisting of the seventy members plus the High Priest. As far as we can tell from the gospel accounts, this was the first official gathering of the Sanhedrin to make a decision Jesus.

Now let’s examine the nature of unbelief as expressed here. I believe the same is true today, especially in countries that have had much exposure to the Christian Gospel. First of all:

A. Unbelief Is Generally Not Due to Insufficient Evidence – Our text is a great illustration of that truth. Image the depth of their unbelief. Anyone who could stand by a grave, watch a man who had been dead 4 days walk out, and not believe would seem to be a hopeless case. V.46 says that some of those eyewitnesses told the Pharisees what happened. So they heard sufficient eyewitness testimony. Then, when the council met, the religious leaders acknowledged that Jesus worked miracles. There were too many¹ eyewitnesses to deny it. They asked in the last of v.47, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs.” They acknowledged that Jesus not only worked that great miracle in Bethany, but many other miracles as well. Then they said in v.48, “If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him....” They admitted that the evidence for Jesus was so overwhelming that everyone would feel compelled to believe in Him.

Yet, in spite of all this evidence, as far as we know, no one spoke up and said, “Why don’t we believe in Him?” Instead, we see that they persisted in unbelief. The words of Abraham, quoted in Jesus’ story in Luke 16:31, were well illustrated: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.” Their attitude of unbelief was one of, “Don’t confuse me with facts, my mind is made up.” A few weeks later many of the same religious leaders said to Jesus as He died on the cross, “. . . If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him” (Matt. 27:42). That was not true. Many who saw the dead raised, or heard eyewitness accounts that Christ raised the dead, remained in unbelief.

If that was the case then, why should we be surprised at unbelief today? We must not be discouraged if most people today are not true believers in Jesus Christ.

I wonder how many would say, “If I had been with Moses and if I had seen the Red Sea part, I would have become a believer.” Or who would say, “If I had seen the miracles of Jesus with my own eyes, I would have believed in Jesus.” Yet right here in our text these people saw or heard about one of the greatest miracles Jesus performed, and yet remained unbelievers. The problem is not lack of evidence. We have all the evidence we need in the Bible. It is full of reliable, eyewitness testimony that has been well-preserved for centuries.

B. Unbelief Is a Choice – More often than not, a person does not believe because He doesn’t *want* to believe in Jesus. He *can’t* understand because he *won’t* understand. Jesus said in John 7:17, “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.” The fact is, miracles and other evidence will not convert a sinner who doesn’t *want* to be converted. That is why Revelation 22:17 says, “And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”

C. Unbelief Is a Heart Problem – Every person in this story that did not become a believer did so because of self-centered and sinful considerations. The eyewitnesses who did not believe, but went & told the Pharisees, did so to win approval from them. Then, two groups conspired together to deal with Jesus. The chief priests were ex-high priests, mostly of the politically oriented sect of the Sadducees. They were theological liberals who didn’t believe in resurrection or angels. They were secular minded, worldly and pragmatic, perfectly willing for the Roman rule to continue as long as they were permitted by the Romans to enjoy ruling authority and wealth. They did not believe in Jesus because they began to see Him as a threat to political stability, and their own power.

The other members of the council were the conservative religious legalists known as the

¹ That many Jews came to mourn Lazarus’s death indicates he was a prominent citizen.

Pharisees. They believed in resurrection, but they did not rejoice in the resurrection of Lazarus! They were the primary religious leaders in terms of popular following. They saw Jesus as a threat to their own standing among the people. As v.48 says, they realize that they must stop Him before it is too late. They said, "If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him..." That meant that the leaders would lose their own credibility with the people, and lose their places of leadership, for they had spoken publicly against Him. They were already upset that the people were going to hear Jesus instead of them.

Notice in the last of v.48 what else they were concerned about, "and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation." They feared Rome, because it had been known to scatter people who had been involved in insurrections. They had shown their intolerance of political rivals in the past, including those who claimed to be a Messiah. Passover was at hand, and a huge crowd was due in to Jerusalem. They thought that if Jesus got a big following and the people pushed Him into becoming their Messiah, Rome would come down and squash the rebellion, taking away their religious and political authority. Of course, they were wrong. They should have known that previously Jesus had refused to allow the people to make Him into a political king (6:15). He had no political ambitions. No, the concern of the leadership was pure self-interest. They saw Jesus as a threat to their own position and power in the nation.

So these two rival sects who hated each other most bitterly buried their differences because they had a common "enemy." After the raising of Lazarus the severity of conflict had reached a point where decisive action was inevitable. The council feels they cannot ignore this great miracle. He had raised Lazarus within two miles of the Jewish temple, the seat of their power. They did agree on one thing: they wanted to get rid of Jesus. Exactly how was yet to be determined.

Then Caiaphas,² the High Priest, spoke up in vv.49-50. Caiaphas expresses an egotistical, rude attitude when he says, "You know nothing at all." He might as well have said, "You dummies." He tells them why and how to get rid of Jesus in v.50, "nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish." He said in effect, "If we don't put Jesus to death, He will lead a rebellion. Rome will squash it, and we'll all die. So, men, either Jesus dies or the nation perishes." Under the guise of noble patriotism, this unscrupulous scoundrel was trying to get rid of an obstacle to his own power, wealth, and glory! But he was a phony. There was no real threat of revolution. Around this time Jesus said, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt. 22:21). Caiaphas was more concerned with scoring political loyalty to the Romans and maintaining their favor toward him. He could have said, "Never mind about His miracles, or His great teaching, or the beauty of His character. His life is a perpetual danger to *our* self-interest. I vote for death!"³

What is amazing is the weakness of his argument. Don't you think that a Man who could raise the dead, heal the blind and sick, and calm the storms could handle the Romans! If the nation believed in Jesus and followed Him, He would have been the Messianic King who could have restored the Kingdom to Israel. In Revelation 19 we see that all the armies of the world are no match for Jesus!

When the Church became corrupt and apostate during the Middle Ages, God raised up

² Caiaphas ruled the Sanhedrin from A.D. 18 to A.D. 36.

³ Caiaphas follows a common strategy to get the Council to accept his proposal. He **presents two extreme alternatives as if there were no other**. Then he pressured the council into agreeing with him. He in effect says, "Either Jesus dies or we all die." Also, they began to fulfill the prophecy of Psalms 2:2, "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His Christ."

reformers. Yet those in established positions of authority did not believe the true Gospel, but persecuted the reformers to protect their own self-interest. Many early Baptists and other reformers died as martyrs at the hands of such men. History repeated itself.

Yet the lessons of this speech are for us all. How many lay people choose not to believe in Jesus because of the adverse effect they believe a faith commitment to Christ would have on them? They do not become Christians because they feel they would have to attend church most every Sunday. Or they know they will have to stop getting drunk, stop getting high, and stop their immoral lifestyle. And what about you in my audience? Do you accept or reject a sermon based on self-interest? Many people judge something not by whether it is right or wrong, but by how it will affect them: "How will such-and-such affect my income, status, or happiness?" People will vote in November not based on the character of the candidates or what is good for the entire nation but based on their own perceived self-interest! The problem of unbelief is a person's unwillingness to repent of sin, and yield control of their life to the Lord Jesus. John 3:19-20 says, "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light...." Men refuse to believe because they love their sin more than Jesus!

So let's be honest with ourselves and God. If you are not yet a believer, admit that the real reason is because you do not *want* to become a believer because you don't want to give up your lifestyle. You don't want to yield your life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It really doesn't have anything to do with lack of evidence.

There is application here to the subject of witnessing for Christ. Before you go out and witness to someone, you need to pray that God will soften up that person's heart so that the Word of God will take root in their heart. Furthermore, a person will believe on Jesus only when God convicts them of sin, gives them the faith to believe and when they are *willing* to believe. No one can come to Christ until God reaches into his heart and melts away the unbelief and softens their hart heart. Human nature is totally depraved, and only the grace and power of God can convict a sinner, and lead someone to believe in Christ.

Finally, there is one more truth about unbelief that everyone should consider:

II. UNDERSTAND THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNBELIEF

Unbelief invites the judgment of God as much or more than anything. Most people fail to recognize the seriousness of unbelief. It assaults the character of God. When you do not believe in Jesus you are calling God a liar because He has given clear testimony concerning His Son on many occasions and in many ways (1 John 5:10). Unbelief is the root of so many other sins. So such a serious sin will lead to several consequences, including several that are indicated by our text:

A. Spiritual Blindness – The reaction of the leadership to the resurrection of Lazarus indicates spiritual blindness. Look again at the last of v.47, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs." The obvious answer should have been, "Let's believe in Jesus and proclaim Him as our Messiah." Yet in spite of the miracles that they acknowledged, they still wouldn't believe that Jesus is God's Messiah but instead just wanted to get rid of Him! Such unbelief fueled by self-interest will make us as blind as bats to the truth. They tell us that fish which live in the water of caverns come to lose their eyesight; and men that are always living in the dark holes of their own selfishness will lose their spiritual sight. "There are none so blind as those who *will* not see."

Why is it that believers see spiritual truth so clearly and yet others just don't see the truth? It

is because they are spiritually blind. Paul said in 2 Cor. 4:4, “whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.”

B. Sinful Behavior - This same self-regard may bring a man down to any kind and degree of wrongdoing. Caiaphas and the other religious leaders were guardians of the law and yet they agreed to violate one of the 10 Commandments, “You shall not murder.” Their unbelief brought them down to become accomplices of murderers, as we see in v.53. Such self-interest also sears our consciences so that we no longer see the wrong of what we are doing. Prov. 16:25 warns, “There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.”

So if you continue in a state of unbelief, don’t be surprised if you become worse and worse in sin, and even commit sins you never thought you would ever do.

C. Judgment from God - The sad part was that killing Jesus didn’t ultimately save the nation. The very thing they feared by leaving Jesus alone came to pass. Their unbelief and rejection of Jesus led to the destruction of the nation. About 40 years later, Rome smashed the nation into oblivion. Over 1 million Jews were killed under Titus Vespasian, and their nation was destroyed. Killing Jesus didn’t save the nation; it destroyed it. The prophet said, “Behold! I lay in Zion for a foundation, a tried Stone.” Build upon it and you are safe. If you do not build upon it, that Stone becomes “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.” You must either build upon Christ or fall over Him. You must either build upon Christ, or be crushed to powder under Him (Dan. 2:34-35). Make your choice! The twofold effect is always true, but we can choose which of the two shall be wrought upon us.

Once you understand the true nature of unbelief in reference to Jesus, I believe you are ready for my last main point:

III. CHOOSE TO BELIEVE IN JESUS

In v.45 John points out that many of those Jews who came out and saw this miracle believed in Jesus. I want you to notice with me a few points about their faith that should be true of us:

A. Recognize the Object of Faith - Notice in v.45 that they did not simply believe. Rather, they believed “on Him,” or literally “into Him” (*ein auton*). For faith to be meaningful, it must be placed in the right object. Faith is only as good as the object of your faith.

How many of you do not trust airplanes? You don’t like to fly. Suppose someone talked you into getting on a plane. You have just enough faith to get on one. Well, whether you arrive safely has less to do with the amount of your faith, and more to do with the mechanical condition of the plane, and the expertise of the crew. What matters most is the object of your faith, not the size of your faith.

Even so, faith is spiritually useless unless it is placed in Jesus Christ. Peter said in Acts 4:12, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Christ is the essential object of faith for salvation. Have you made a personal decision to place your faith in Jesus Christ? I didn’t ask if you have joined a church or been baptized. Have you placed your faith in Jesus as the only one who can forgive your sins, and give you eternal life?

Now what is it about Jesus that should be the object of our trust? First of all:

1. Believe He Is the Son of God – This was proven by the miracle of Lazarus. Only God can raise the dead. Jesus must be the Son of God.

2. Believe He Died for our Sins – John sees another evidence of this in what happened when the Sanhedrin met. Though he didn't intend to do so, Caiaphas gave a prophecy about Jesus in vv.51-52. This man who filled the office of high priest, being the spiritual head of Israel, was naturally the medium of a divine oracle. Jesus indeed died for the nation that its people might not perish. The words Caiaphas uttered in hatred were transformed by God into a prophecy with a deeper meaning. Yes, Jesus was, indeed, to die for the nation. God is sovereign. He is in control. Even the evil intent of men is turned by Him into His own purposes. Christ's crucifixion was the worst thing men could do, yet it accomplished the greatest blessing on their behalf. God was able to use Caiaphas' own words to declare the effects of Christ's death. Prov. 19:21 says, "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand." It had been decreed in the eternal counsels of the Godhead that Christ should die for the sins of men (Rev. 13:8), and when Caiaphas advanced his proposal, he was but a link in the chain that brought that decree to pass.⁴

In these verses we see 2 truths about the death of Christ. First, it was a substitutionary death. V.51 says "that Jesus would die for (*huper*) the nation." We deserve death because of our sin but Jesus died in our place. He suffered what we deserve. Second, it was a unifying death. John comments in v.52, "and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad." Jesus not only died for Israel, but for the Gentiles also so that He might make those groups into one. Cf. John 10:15, 16. All who place their faith in Christ become one in Him (quote Gal. 3:28). Jews and Gentiles are brought together into one body, the Church, united with those children of God who constitute "all Israel". Yes! The only thing that unites men together is their common relation to a Divine Redeemer. That bond is deeper than all national bonds, race, family, friendship, and social ties.⁵

B. Make Sure of the Reality of Your Faith – I believe the people mentioned in v.45 really did believe in Jesus. I believe that these Jews truly were saved for the following reasons: First, Jesus made the statement in v.4 that the sickness of Lazarus was "for the glory of God that the Son of God might be glorified by it." When people believe in Him, Jesus receives the greatest glory. And secondly, there is a real contrast between vv. 45 & 46, between those who believed and those who did not (even though *de* is used instead of the stronger adversative *alla*).

But on the other hand, the phrase "believed on him" does not always imply genuine, saving faith. James 2:19 says, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!" Although many people saw Christ's miracles in John 2, Jesus did not commit Himself to them because He knew the character of their belief was not legitimate (vv.23-25). Belief can refer to either genuine heart belief or mere mental assent. Christ shows the difference between the two in John 8:30-31 where it says, "As He spoke these words, many believed in Him. Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.'" There are millions of people who would not deny that Jesus is the Son of God, but they

⁴ Was there anything strange in a bad man's prophesying? Did not the Spirit of God breathe through Balaam of old? God even enabled his donkey to speak! Is there anything incredible in a man's prophesying unconsciously? Did not Pilate do so, when he nailed over the Cross, "This is the King of the Jews."

⁵ This Gospel was written after the fall of Jerusalem. The whole tone of it shows that the conception of the Church as quite separate from Judaism was firmly established. The narrower national system had been shattered, and from out of the dust and hideous ruin of its crushing fall had emerged the fairer reality of a Church as wide as the world.

don't really know Him with the kind of belief that results in salvation. Three fourths of all Americans believe in heaven. But not all are saved!

Conclusion: What about the reality of your faith? Do you believe in Christ? Have you truly repented of sin? Are you among those who truly believe in Jesus? Are you a Christian who has now had your faith strengthened by seeing Christ display His power in John 11?

Or do you reject Him as others have done? Don't let perceived self-interest keep you from faith in Jesus, or you will find that the very actions you take for your self-interest will actually lead to your destruction. Jesus said in Mt. 16:25, "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

Sources: Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); Herschel H. Hobbs, *John: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Resurrection and the Life: John 11* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1986); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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