

The Theology of Unbelief (John 12:35–50)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (3/20/2022)

Introduction

1. A discourse explaining verses 34–36 closes John 12. This discourse also officially closes John’s tracing of Christ’s public ministry. The next five chapters (13–17) develop Christ’s ministry in preparing His disciples for His exodus (His death, resurrection, and ascension Chapters 18–21), and their duties and resources to continue His ministry.

The Jewish leadership had already determined that Jesus must die (11:53). Now, the crowds, hoping that He was going to establish the kingdom, were disappointed and turning hostile (v. 34). The Jews apparently understood that Jesus was predicting His death at the hands of the Jews. John explains that “lifting up” meant the cross, the means whereby Jesus would die. However, confusing matters, the reference to “the Son of Man” tied the conversation to Daniel’s prophecy where the Ancient of Days gives the Son of Man a kingdom that will never end. In addition, there was nothing in that prophecy about Messiah’s dying.

2. Jesus’ response to their confusion was to point them to the *light* (vv. 35, 36). The contrast between the unbelieving Jews and the believing Christ-followers was already seen in John’s prologue (John 1:9–13). The responsibility to walk in the light is pressed upon them, even though Jesus knew they would “not receive Him.” Here we find the collision of two important truths—the responsibility of man and the sovereign determination of God. We will address this point later in the message.
3. The impending rejection of Jesus was about to present a problem of monumental proportions for the Jewish nation—*unbelief* resulting in permanent judgment because they refused to walk in the light. The Jewish expectation of Messiah was very high and was accelerated by Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (vv. 25, 26, citing Psalm 118). But expectation and reality quickly plunged anticipation into hostile unbelief, which resulted in the Lamb of God being sacrificed for His people’s sins (John 1:29).

This unbelief of the Jews in questioning Christ’s Messianic claims became a significant contribution to God’s will that Jesus be rejected and crucified. The Scripture (Romans 9–11) explains that the unbelief of the Jews was necessary to the Lord’s rejection, which was now proved by John.

I. The Penalty Prophesied

1. Jesus began by giving a *warning* (to paraphrase): “You have the Light for only a while longer; take advantage of the light while you can” (v. 35). Remember, in John 1:9 and 10, Jesus was declared to be the true Light who came into the world so that those who received and trusted Him would be granted the privilege of becoming sons of God. Thus, Jesus admonished the Jews, “*Walk in the light in order to become sons of light.*”
2. The Jews’ unbelief was systemic. In Chapter 3, Jesus explained that the condemnation of unbelief was due to their love of sin (3:19, 20). The OT, particularly the Prophets, documented the persistent unbelief of the nation of Israel. Malachi closed the OT with a final warning (Malachi 4:1). However, in this word of judgment, there is also a word of mercy for the remnant (Malachi 4:2). But, there is also a warning (v. 4). The believing remnant heed the warning, and, for them, the Lord graciously promised salvation (vv. 5, 6). Jesus followed the pattern of Malachi’s last words—the pronouncement of judgment and the promise of salvation for the remnant, those who fear His name.
3. The fact that sinners cannot believe does not absolve them from the responsibility to believe (vv. 35, and 36a). Inability to believe does not result from non-election but from one’s own sinful rebellion.

II. The Problem Pronounced

1. The fact is the Jews were shut out by their own unbelief (vv. 37; John 20:30, 31). This is what Moses warned the people in Deuteronomy 29:2–4. The problem of unbelief leading to rejection was predicted in Isaiah 53:1. Two things are declared by Isaiah. The first question reveals the reason the Servant of the Lord was rejected by the people. The second question reveals that those who believed saw the Savior exalted by the Lord. Also, notice what was heard, the *message*—Jesus’ teachings—and what was *seen*, the arm of the Lord—Jesus’ miracles (vv. 37, 38).
2. John cites for support Isaiah 6:9 and 10, which revealed the judicial hardening of the Jews. They refused to hear; thus, they could not hear. The Lord commanded Isaiah to tell them, “*Keep on hearing, but do not understand*” (Isaiah 6:9). Then He told Isaiah, “*Make the heart of this people dull*” (v. 10). How would Isaiah make their hearts dull and their ears heavy? All he needed to do was to keep preaching the Word of God to them. Their sinful hearts, unchanged by grace, would do the work of hardening. Isaiah responded, “*How long, O Lord?*” The Lord’s answer was to do so until judgment came. Jesus declared judgment had come.

III. The Principle Pondered

1. Again, how does God blind eyes? He simply gives unbelievers His Word. They refuse the Word and, thus, harden their own hearts in unbelief and disobedience. For example, Jesus informed the disciples that He taught the people in parables because “*to you [the believing remnant] has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside [unbelievers] everything is in parables*” (Mark 4:11). On stating this, Jesus quoted Isaiah 6 as proof.
2. Judicial hardening is not a capricious act; it is a holy judgment against guilty souls who are condemned to be and do what they have chosen. God’s sovereignty is also the only cause for hope. If He is not sovereign, we have no reason to petition Him for help. Isaiah includes a plea for mercy (Isaiah 63:15-19).
Interestingly, John notes that Isaiah saw God’s glory—Jesus—and spoke of Him (v. 41; Isaiah 6:1).
3. John closed the section on unbelief with a second caution. Real faith does not fear the opinions of men (vv. 44–50).

Lessons

1. Judgment is certain; thus, God has, in grace, provide for salvation.
 - a. The authority of Jesus in this saving work rests in the One who sent Him (vv. 44, 45, 49).
 - b. Jesus, being the Light of the world, is the supreme disclosure of God Himself (v. 46). To reject Jesus is to reject the Father also.
 - c. All who reject Him will be judged on the last day (vv. 47, 48).
 - d. Jesus’ obedience to the Father’s will is the only hope of sinners (v. 50).
2. Closing advice (repeated from last week’s message):
 - a. Never blame your unbelief on God’s sovereignty. You are responsible for your own failure to believe.
 - b. Secret faith because of the fear of men is insufficient for salvation (vv. 42, 43).
 - c. Keep yourself in the Word of God. The self-revelation of God is called the Word (see 1:1-3). Jesus is the living Word, revealing the Father, and the written Word reveals the Son. The Bible is the living record of the Living Word. All judgment will be in accordance with this Book, the Word of God.