
How Believing Fails

John 12:1-50

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It is easy for things to go wrong.

We often have things we rely in trust and break. My recent flat tires...

I am bringing you this morning to a very large text – 50 verses. Now you won't need your lunch buckets. I have chosen to take this whole chapter together because of the importance of John is telling us. Too often, it is broken up and we can no longer hear the melodic line.

So, open your Bibles and let's how and why believing fails.

Examples

(v.1-26)

These scenes move from a dinner that would have celebrated the beginning of the Passover season to a grand entry into the city. Hovering darkly in the background are religious people, people professing faith in God whose supposed faith is false. John places before us EXAMPLES of how believing fails. He does so through a series of glaring contrasts.

In Spite of Deep Devotion

(v.1-8)

Believing fails in spite of Mary's act of deep devotion.

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

What Mary does is risky, expensive, daring. Here is an act of faith. Jesus says that she has done this because she has accepted the truth of His impending death. With this exotic perfume, Mary has anointed Him in life because she believes in His death. She buried her brother in unbelief; she anoints Jesus in belief. Her risen from the dead brother sits at the table in wonder at his sister's faith and love and devotion.

Judas' words of spiritual arrogance and greed are masked in social justice.

⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

His disdain for Mary and her act of devotion is covered in spiritual honey. This perfume was worth a year's salary – wouldn't it have been better to sell it and give it to the

poor. At the time it sounded like a genuine spiritual concern. In retrospect, John sees it for what it really was – money not in Judas’ bag and therefore not in his pocket. See, Judas was the treasurer. He was responsible for the team’s money. He regularly helped himself to it.

In the face of a deep and believing devotion that understand the cross, Judas craves money.

In Spite of Humble Praise

(v.9-15)

In a stunning move, the chief priests, the religious leaders are plotting murder.

⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

They are not only ready to kill Jesus, but are also are plotting to murder Lazarus. Lazarus was living testimony to the power of Jesus and authenticity of His claim to be the Messiah. So, rather than believe, let’s destroy the evidence, let’s kill Lazarus.

In contrast, the crowd is ready to accept and acclaim Jesus.

¹² The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” ¹⁴ And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ¹⁵ “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

John’s record of the triumphal entry is meant to be a contrast. His use of the event is different than the other gospel writers. He is not merely recording the event, he is telling it to make a point. The leaders reject Jesus and the people are willing to accept Jesus. So the humble praise and believing worship simply sets the chief priests teeth on edge.

In Spite of Gentile Acceptance

(v.16-22)

The Pharisees, the religious teachers, are exasperated in the face of Jesus’ apparent popularity.

¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. ¹⁷ The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸ The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”

I love the irony here. The disciples didn’t understand what was going on until Jesus was ascended and the Spirit came. Jesus’ glorification illuminated past events. (There is whole hermeneutical principle there – but that for another day). But the crowds who saw Lazarus raised from the dead can’t stop talking about it. “O, shut up,” the religious leaders say. They have to put a stop to this. The whole world is going after Jesus.

Ah, but Gentiles are seeking Him as well.

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹ So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

In this simple telling is all we need to know about witnessing – just take people to Jesus. When the religious leaders hate Jesus and plot His death, Gentiles, Greek proselytes, want to seek Jesus. See, the whole world is going after Him. Here is the glory of Jesus.

Is this window into the past a mirror into the present? Do you see yourself here? Do you disdain real passionate zeal for Jesus? Are you jealous of the time, attention, money He gets? Do you want people just to get on with living and stop going on and on about Him? Are you caught up in causes, even religious ones? In what way has your belief failed? Or do you simply want to believe Him, love Him, seek Him and serve Him?

Explanations

(v.23-40)

John is not one to leave us without some explanations. Why is this stuff happening? He shows how a cross kind of death is God's chosen way to glorify Himself. Note how often glory is used in these verses.

The Centrality of the Cross

(v.23-33)

The cross is central to belief. Through death Jesus will bring about life and victory. Note how Jesus says it and John records it.

The cross brings life

(v.23-26)

²³ And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

Jesus is going to be glorified through the cross, through dying and being raised again. For His followers, for us, faith will take us through the cross. What does that mean? Simply that we are willing to give up our lives to follow Jesus. He is not talking about just giving up simple earthly trinkets – He is calling for us to be willing to die. Saving faith believes in the cross, not just for Jesus, but for us as well.

The cross brings victory

(v.27-33)

²⁷ "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will

draw all people to myself.”³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

So many amazing things are wrapped up in this simple paragraph. Jesus sets us an example of not seeking to escape the cross but rather of embracing it. God will be seen to be large, worthy and weighty when we, like Jesus, are willing to give up our lives. And Jesus is glorified through the victory the cross brings. Jesus’ death and resurrection begins the judgment of the world and the casting down of Satan, the enemy of our souls. Finally, it is through the cross that Jesus will draw people to Him so that they may be saved.

Just a word here for experienced Christians. John tells us what is meant by the little phrase, “If I be lifted up...” It is a backward reference to the brazen serpent in the wilderness and a forward reference to Jesus’ dying as a criminal on a Roman cross. This is not talking about our “lifting Jesus up.” It is about the cross being the focal point and the gathering place of the people groups.

The Necessity of Believing

(v.34-36a)

Jesus highlights the necessity of believing as He answers an objection to the necessity of the cross.

³⁴ So the crowd answered him, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?”³⁵ 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.³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

The crowd understood Jesus’ reference. But they object. How can the triumphant Son of Man, the Messiah, die as a criminal? Since the Old Testament says the Messiah will never die, then who is this second, dying, Son of Man?

I love Jesus’ answer. Clear isn’t it? In fact He seems to change the subject. He points them to believing in and therefore walking in the light. He is the Light. He is here. He, Jesus is not only the Messiah, the Son of Man and the Light of the world, He is all the Law foretold. So, believe in Him lest you remain in your darkness.

The Reasons for Unbelief

(v.36b-43)

John then shows why and how belief fails. God acts and man is responsible.

Blinded by God

(v.36b-41)

Unbelief is an effect of being blinded by God.

When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.³⁷ Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him,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?”

³⁹ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, ⁴⁰ “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.”

⁴¹ Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.

In the Scriptures, they *cannot* believe because they have been blinded by God. What God predicted in Isaiah 6 in His call of Isaiah to the prophetic office, has now reached its consummation. From the time of Isaiah till the time of Jesus, people were unable to believe because they were blinded by God.

I don't know where you are theologically - but whatever you believe you must accept what John is saying and the fact that they are condemned for not believing. They are not viewed as being helpless robots, but active participants. God blinds and...

Loved Man's Glory

(v.42-43)

They won't believe because of sin.

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

In the situation this blindness works itself out in many who would not believe and openly confess Christ. The blindness occurs because of the fear of man expressed in craving for approval. Yet clearly, they are responsible for their own sin and their own unbelief.

So the explanation that is given here is not the grounds for an excuse. You are responsible and God is God. If you do not believe and you reject Christ because of _____ then you will be condemned. All the while, the sovereign plan and purposes are God are being worked out in real people's lives.

Exhortations

(v.44-50)

Finally, a call to those who are struggling with believing.

⁴⁴ And Jesus cried out and said, “Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. ⁴⁵ And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. ⁴⁶ I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷ If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸ The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. ⁴⁹ For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”

In a Promise**(v.44-46)**

Jesus passionately declares that those who truly believe are those who believe in Him and thus believe in the Father. Those who believe are promised that they will not live in darkness but will walk in light.

With a Warning**(v.47-48)**

Jesus also warns that those who reject Him and do not believe in Him will one day be judged. There is no neutral ground. You either believe in Jesus and thus live and walk in light or you reject Him and thus will come under condemnation. You will one day be judged by the Word, both Jesus in His person and by Jesus with His words.

By an Assurance**(v.49-50)**

Finally, this word of promise and warning are folded in together in a way that gives assurance. Jesus is not and the apostles are not simply talking. They are not making it up as they go. There is an authority of truth behind this great call and command to believe. So when we believe we are assured that we will not wake up one day in this life or the life to come and find out that our belief in Jesus and His Word was a farce. No, He speaks what the Father commands and thus it is true. Believe it.

Reflect and Respond

Does some of this text bother you? You hear that God blinds and so people don't believe. Yet, the people who don't believe will be judged. Does this cause you to question God? Does it cause you to question the Bible - I do think this text is plain. Does it cause you to go on in unbelief and sin and try to blame God? Or do cry out for mercy that God will lift your blindness and pour life into your deadness so that you can believe?

Are you like Judas, the chief priests, the Pharisees here? You see the joy, love and small baby steps of others obedience and it aggravates you? You don't want it to be like this. You want your comfort, ease, sin and yet you want God and the religious leaders to accept and admire you? John has intentionally included you in this text. Do you see yourself? Do you see that you may well not be a believer? The issue here is not one of doctrinal agreement but of being saved by believing and bowing to Christ.

So we come to a very simple call. Do you really believe in Jesus? Do you really bow to Jesus? Are you willing to die for Him? Are you willing to pour out the expensive perfume of your life and your devotion to Him?

Be assured my friends, that this is the truth. This is what Jesus said. It is what John wrote. We are warned through this. But we are also comforted. All who do believe and bow have eternal life and will walk with God and will one day see Him face to face. This is the comfort of the gospel.