

The Challenge of Unbelief (John 12:37-50)

The Gospel of John presents faith in Jesus Christ as its goal, faith that results in eternal life (John 20:30-31). Those who witnessed Jesus' miracles should have readily come to a place of faith. But faith is much more than a mental exercise. It's a spiritual reality, one that stands in tension with self-sufficiency and self-direction. To believe in Jesus is to turn from self. For this reason faith, while the logical response to Jesus, is a spiritual struggle. Unbelief reigns in the hearts of many. John describes this rejection of faith among the people of Jesus' day. He also points out that some people entertained a cautious faith, hiding their belief from the public eye. But Jesus taught that faith in Him is the same as faith in God the Father, a faith that results in eternal spiritual life. Faith is a spiritual struggle, and unbelief poses a challenge to every human heart. Self naturally rejects faith, but only faith in Jesus produces eternal life.

**Even in the face of the miraculous,
many people will reject Jesus (12:37-41).**

John records his observations about the varied responses to Jesus and His message. Many people rejected Jesus, a spiritual reality that fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.

In spite of Jesus' many miracles many people refused to put their faith in Him (12:37).

Jesus had publicly performed many miraculous signs. John includes seven of these signs in his Gospel—turning water into wine (John 2:1-12), healing a royal official's son (John 4:46-54), healing a disabled man (John 5:1-9), feeding the five thousand (John 6:1-13), walking on water (John 6:16-21), healing a blind man (John 9:1-7), and raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44). This selection represented countless other miracles (John 20:30). Nevertheless, many people refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Faith isn't simply a matter of the mind, but must include the heart—and the human heart naturally resists the things of God.

Disbelief in Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecies of Isaiah, who foresaw the glory of the Messiah (12:38-41).

John indicated that disbelief in Jesus shouldn't surprise us. The Old Testament prophets, specifically Isaiah, warned that people would reject the Messiah. Isaiah 53:1 introduces a moving passage about the sacrificial death of the Messiah and indicates that people would not believe the message and would reject the revelation of God's power ("the arm of the Lord"). John clearly links Isaiah 53 with the person and work of Jesus Christ. He further states that the people were unable to put their faith in Jesus because of spiritual blindness. Citing Isaiah 6:10, John emphasized that the proclamation of truth would add to the spiritual blindness and the hardness of heart in the lives of many. While it was not God's purpose to produce spiritual blindness, the nature of the human heart is such that truth rejected produces greater blindness, greater hardness of heart. Those who open their eyes to God's truth will understand the truth in their hearts, turn to God, and receive His divine, eternal, spiritual healing. John states that Isaiah had witnessed Jesus' "glory" and had spoken about Him. This revelation of Jesus to the prophet

Isaiah would have included Isaiah's vision recorded in Isaiah 6:1-5. Isaiah's messianic prophecies pointed to Jesus. The fact that people rejected Jesus fulfilled many of these prophecies. Faith is a spiritual struggle against self.

**Even when people believe in Jesus, they will
often favor status over taking a public stand (12:42-43).**

If faith is a spiritual struggle, being open about faith in Jesus Christ also poses certain challenges. As in John's day, many people find it difficult to publicly proclaim their faith.

Some among the Jewish leaders did put their faith in Jesus but refused to acknowledge Him publicly (12:42).

Faith in Jesus wasn't entirely absent among the Jewish leaders. In fact, John states that many of these leaders actually believed in Jesus. They considered Him to be the true Messiah. However, these leaders didn't declare their faith openly. They were fearful of the Pharisees who had jurisdiction over the synagogues and who had decreed that Jesus' followers must be excluded from the synagogues (John 9:22). The risk of being cut off from the spiritual life of Judaism was too much for these secret believers.

Those who refused to acknowledge Jesus publicly were motivated by the praise of people in contrast to the praise of God (12:43).

Not only did these secret believers want to avoid being separated from the synagogue, but they wanted to maintain their favored status within the Jewish community. As John states it, "They loved the glory of people more than the glory of God." They welcomed human praise at the expense of divine recognition. While John's words bring reproach on such secret believers they do not necessarily exclude such believers from truly possessing eternal life. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were among these secret believers, and they eventually made known their loyalty to Jesus (John 19:38-42). Faith in Jesus must become a public faith, both to help the believer grow spiritually and to help unbelievers observe the life changing power of Jesus.

**Even though Jesus offers salvation, many remain
in spiritual darkness and face eternal judgment (12:44-50).**

At this point John returns to quoting the words of Jesus. Jesus declared that faith in Him is identical to faith in God the Father and results in eternal life.

Jesus declared that to believe in Him is to believe in the Father who sent Him (12:44-45).

Jesus consistently identified Himself as one with God the Father, both in essence and in activity. Jesus is God. Therefore, to believe in Jesus is to believe in God the Father as well. Jesus states that it was the Father who had sent Him into the world. When we look at Jesus we're looking at the Father as well. They are one. We cannot separate the redemptive work of

Jesus from the redemptive plan of God. Therefore, it's impossible to have a relationship with God apart from Jesus Christ.

Jesus stated that those who believe in Him will not remain in darkness because He is light (12:46).

Jesus described Himself as “light” in the world, a world otherwise characterized by spiritual darkness (compare John 1:3-9; 8:12). Those who believe in Him will not “abide” in spiritual darkness. Through faith in Jesus we live in spiritual light instead of spiritual darkness. This includes the fact that we have insight into the spiritual realm that's impossible apart from Jesus. We also have direction for navigating our way through the difficulties that a dark world imposes on us.

Jesus warned that those who reject Him will be judged by the words given to Him by the Father (12:47-49).

Jesus described unbelief as a rejection of His words, His truth. Those who reject Jesus and His truth, the gospel, will necessarily be judged. However, Jesus said that He did not come to judge unbelievers. His purpose in coming into this world was to save, not to condemn (compare John 3:17). Jesus' redemptive work provides eternal salvation for all who believe. However, those who reject Jesus will be judged. That condemnation comes from Jesus' words, words that came from God the Father. The Father sent Jesus into the world with a message of truth, an authoritative commandment. Those who reject the truth of Jesus stand condemned by their own unbelief.

Jesus promised that the words given to Him by the Father lead to eternal life (12:50).

In contrast to condemnation stands the promise of eternal life. The authoritative commandment of the Father, the truth revealed through Jesus Christ, bestows eternal life on all who believe. Jesus' message was that of God the Father, inseparable in its authority and content. Those who respond to the gospel by faith in Jesus Christ have eternal life. Faith, with Jesus as the object of faith, is the key. Faith is a spiritual struggle, and unbelief poses a challenge to every human heart. Self naturally rejects faith, but only faith in Jesus produces eternal life.