

# Our Need to Conquer Fear and Unbelief

John 12:37-49 August 2, 2009

## I. Review

In John 12, we see Jesus as He relates to 4 different groups of people and the lessons that we can learn as we study this section. So far we have studied the first three groups. In the first two groups we see radical worship given to Jesus. Last week we looked at the third group of people in this chapter: the Gentile visitors. We discovered the tragedy of people missing the audible voice of God speaking to them.

## II. Introduction

Today we will look at how Jesus responds to the fourth group of people; the unbelieving Jews (John 12:37-49). This section can be divided into three parts as follows:

- A. The prophecy (12:37-41):  
Jesus tells the Jewish crowd their unbelief was predicted centuries before by Isaiah (Isa. 53:1; 6:10).
- B The praise seekers (12:42-43):  
Some Jewish leaders believe Jesus is the Messiah but will not confess him, for they love men's praise more than God's praise.
- C The promise (12:44-50):  
To accept Christ is to accept the Father, which leads to life everlasting.

## III. Jesus and the Unbelieving Jews (John 12:37-49)

### A The prophecy (of Isaiah)

John 12:37-41 But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the lord been revealed?" For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them." These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him.

1. This paragraph gives John's summary of the effects of the ministry of Jesus upon the religious people and their leaders.

- a. The signs (miracles) which he had performed had generally not led to a response of faith. Jesus was experiencing the same kind of rejection as Isaiah predicted (Is. 53:1). "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the lord been revealed?"

It appears that the emphasis is on God's initiative, although in the original text the statement has the form 'they closed their own eyes'.

- b. John understands the words of Isaiah in the sense that neither the message of God nor the acts of God (the arm of the Lord) resulted in faith on the part of the people.

- c. Following this quotation from Is. 53:1, John refers to Is. 6:10 (when Isaiah saw the vision of glory in the temple.) "He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them."
- d. John's comment in v 41 (These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him.) raises difficulties. In what sense did he mean that Isaiah saw Jesus' glory, or God's glory? In view of the "because" in this verse; it would seem that John saw a direct connection between Isaiah's message and the mission of Christ. John probably has in mind the Suffering Servant of Isaiah as pointing to Christ himself. What he saw was the glory of the one who was to come.
2. The key word in this section is believe (The Greek word is *pisteuo*; Strong's NT number 4100). It is used eight times.
- v. 37 they were not believing ...
  - v. 38 Lord, who has believed our report?
  - v. 39 for this reason they could not believe
  - v. 42 many even of the rulers believed in Him
  - v. 44 he who believes in Me ...
  - v. 44 ...does not believe in Me, but in Him who sent Me.
  - v. 46 ...every one who believes in Me will not remain in darkness
  - v. 46 ...every one who believes in Me will not remain in darkness
  - v. 47 And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, (NKJV)  
(Note: the NASU poorly translates this verse; "does not keep them").
3. There are three stages of unbelief:
- 1) Their unbelief was irrational. The miracles of Jesus was to point people to the fact of who He is.  
John 10:37-39 "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."
  - 2) They would not believe (John 12:37-38, with a quotation from Isa. 53:1):
    - The Jews' national, irrational unbelief had been predicted by Isaiah the prophet. The clearest Old Testament passage concerning the suffering Servant (Isa. 53:1-12) began by stating that Israel would not perceive God's revelation in and through the Servant. Who has believed our message and seen His arm . . . revealed; implies that only a few believed.
    - John from the beginning of his Gospel (1:11) had sounded the theme of national unbelief. John now explained that in spite of all Jesus' miraculous signs, they still would not believe in Him.
  - 3) They could not believe (John 12:39).
    - Both the New and the Old Testament warns of the danger of unbelief. Persistent unbelief results in God hardening a person's heart.

Ex 9:12 And the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he did not listen to them, just as the Lord had spoken to Moses.  
Because Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to let Israel go, even after he saw the supernatural hand of God in the plagues; God (God gave him over to his hardened heart) hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Ps 81:11-12 "But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me. So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices."

The nation of Israel also experienced God giving them over to a hardened heart. The result of this condition resulted in the captivity to Assyria and Babylon.

Rom 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

This verse actually says that it is a deliberate act of people to suppress the truth in order that they can justify living in unrighteousness. As a result of this choice, "God gave them over ... (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

- John again quoted from Isaiah (6:10) to explain that the nation as a whole was unable to believe. Because they constantly rejected God's revelation, He had punished them with judicial blindness and hardness of hearts.
  - People in Jesus' day, like those in Isaiah's day, refused to believe. They "would not believe" (John 12:37); therefore they could not believe (v. 39).
3. In spite of all the clear evidence that was presented to them, the nation would not believe. The "arm of the Lord" had been revealed to them in great power, yet they closed their eyes to the truth. They had heard the message ("report") and seen the miracles, and yet would not believe.
4. In a vision Isaiah . . . saw "the Lord Almighty" (lit., "Yahweh of hosts," or "Yahweh of armies"; Isa. 6:3). John wrote that this glory Isaiah saw was Jesus' glory. The implication is startling:
- Jesus is Yahweh! (John 1:18; 10:30; 20:28; Col. 2:9.)
  - Jesus in His nature is God (but God the Son is distinct in person from God the Father and God the Spirit).
  - Isaiah spoke about Him, for many of Isaiah's prophecies predicted the coming Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth (Isa. 4:2; 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-5, 10; 32:1; 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-3).
  - Earlier Jesus had said that Moses wrote about Him (John 5:46).

#### **B. The praise seekers:**

John 12:42-43 Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

##### 1. John's explanation (12:37-43).

John sets over against the statement of v 37 about Jewish unbelief some instances of faith, even among the leaders. Yet he admits that motives of self-interest were an inhibiting factor in their faith. All too often faith has been cramped by fear of people's reaction to it. Being put out of the synagogue (42) meant excommunication. In John's day there may have been those who were attempting to follow Jesus in a secret way. These words would rebuke them.

2. 12:42-43. In spite of massive national unbelief, the situation was not hopeless. God always has a remnant. Many individuals in high places did believe in Jesus, but for fear of being put out of the synagogue they did not openly confess Him. They feared men's opinions and loved men's praise . . . more than God's praise.
3. "They loved praise from men" (12:42-43). Did the silent minority of leaders who "believed in" Jesus truly believe? Probably so. And many may have taken an open stand for Jesus after His resurrection. Yet their silence was in itself a kind of betrayal.
4. It is hard to see how we can believe wholeheartedly in Jesus and still worry about the opinion His enemies may have of us!
5. When Jesus is gladly acclaimed by Jerusalem's crowds, His enemies are near despair.

### C. The promise:

John 12:44-50 And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me. I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness. If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me."

1. When and where Jesus spoke these words is not indicated. This seems to be a general summary of Jesus' manifestation of Himself to the nation.
2. Cried out (*ekraxen*; "called out"), (John 1:15; 7:28, 37) indicates the importance of the issues before the nation.
  - Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God, the One who sent Him (1:18; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), so that to believe in Jesus is to believe in God.
  - People do not have two objects of faith: God and/or Jesus. When one sees Jesus, he sees the Father who sent Him (John 12:41; 14:9).
  - Jesus came to lead people out of Satan's kingdom of darkness into God's kingdom of love and light (John 1:4, 9; 8:12; 12:35; Col. 1:13-14).
3. It is as if Jesus, having withdrawn (36), returned to make one last public announcement before devoting himself specifically to his disciples (chs. 13-17).
4. There are familiar themes here:
  - The need for faith
  - The close connection between Jesus and the one who sent him (repeated 3X here)
  - The idea of Jesus as light,
  - The contrast between light and darkness

### The theme of judgment

Note: Although judgment is determined by the word of Jesus, yet his mission was not primarily for this purpose. Its objective was salvation; judgment was but the consequence. The agent of judgment is said to be that very word which I spoke (48), which ties up with John's opening identification of Jesus as the Word (1:1). Clearly the basis of authority is of great importance in the matter of judgment, and here that is vested in the perfect agreement of both Father and Son.

The theme of eternal life, (repeats what has already been said earlier in the gospel)

5. Since Jesus is God's Word (Logos) to people, God spoke decisively and finally in Him (Heb. 1:1-3).
  - The issue is the command of the Father.
  - To obey the Father is to come to eternal life (John 12:50).
  - To reject the Father's word-which is Jesus' very word (John 12:48, 50; John 7:16; 14:10, 24) -is to abide in death.
  - Moses predicted the coming of the great Prophet (One who would speak for God). Moses said, "You must listen to Him" (Deut. 18:15).
  - Condemnation at the last day is the penalty for rejecting the One whom the Father sent (Deut. 18:18-19; John 3:18, 36; 5:24).
6. The purpose of God's revelation in Jesus is positive.
  - He came to save, not to judge (12:47; John 3:17; 9:39).
  - But rejection of God's Revelation inevitably brings a hardening in sin and ultimately God's judgment.

### IV. Summary:

#### A. Key verse. 12:44: Faith in God is faith in Jesus.

John 12:44 And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me.

- Jesus is the One God has given to us as the object of our faith.  
Heb 12:1-2 ...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith...
- Everyone must hear His words and display faith by keeping those words, or fall short of finding eternal life (vv. 44-50).

#### B. Personal application:

- John 12:44-50 Jesus concludes His public ministry with an exhortation of the importance of personal response (faith) to His mission (the cross).

- The fear of man makes many to be private (closet) Christians.

Through it all the leaders refuse to believe and the prominent few who refuse to acknowledge Him do so because they fear being ostracized (vv. 37-43).

- The way we conquer unbelief is through repentance.

In the words of Moses, these "are not just idle words for you-they are your life" (Deut. 32:47).

- Let nothing keep you from confessing faith in Christ.

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