

Reject or Believe

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Preacher: Sam James

[0 : 00] As we stand, let's pray together before Lizzie comes to read from John's Gospel. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you that your word is indeed wonderful.

Thank you that it is a lamp, an anchor, a rock. And yet we want to heed the warning and encouragement of the book of Hebrews. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. And we pray, therefore, this morning for your mercy on us as we hear your word. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

So today's reading is John chapter 12, verses 36b to 43. And in the Church Bibles, you'll find that on page 1084.

John chapter 12, verse 36b to 43. When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.

[1 : 05] Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

Therefore, they could not believe.

For again, Isaiah said, 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.

Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. 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. For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

[2 : 02] Thank you very much for reading. Let me add my welcome to Simon's. As he said, my name is Sam, and I'm just joining you here, my wife and our children and I, for these three weeks in John's Gospel as you kick off your series.

So if you don't know me, please do feel free to say hello after the service. And the question we are thinking about this morning is this. What is it that stops a world from believing?

What is it that stops a world from believing? I guess if you asked around, you'd probably have a variety of answers. We are quite a big fan of the office in our family.

And Ricky Gervais, the famous atheist comedian, he says this. If God exists, why did he make me an atheist? You might think he has a good point.

One of my favorite books I read in 2021 was this one, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* by Carl Truman. It's fantastic in lots of ways. Benji has his endorsement from Benji, so I can assure you it comes well recommended.

[3 : 08] Carl Truman, it's a bit of a historical essay. He kind of traces the story of the West and tries to explain how we've come from a world which believes in God and increasingly kind of pushed him to the margins and focused more on ourselves.

Very interesting. All kinds of points that he makes that are worth taking seriously. But you don't have to look very far to find reasons that seem quite reasonable, right? So psychological reasons, sociological reasons, economic, political, moral, intellectual, historical reasons to why the world doesn't believe in God anymore.

Except it turns out that John, the author of this book, well he has his own reasons. And we sometimes think, don't we, that we are the sort of sceptical age.

We've discovered the tools of reason and science. And we have insights that back then people just didn't have access to. They just sort of believed whatever they were told. Well that's not true.

Unbelief and scepticism, they're not unfamiliar to John's gospel. I'm sure you might have even noticed it in our passage. Look again at verse 37. Even though, John says, he had done so many

signs before them, they still did not believe.

[4 : 25] You see, it's one thing to ask why don't we believe now. But here's an even harder question. Why didn't they believe, the people who were actually there, people that saw Jesus in the flesh, people that witnessed the things he said and did, and still rejected him?

The whole way through this chapter and the last, we've been tracing the story as Jesus approaches his death. And now, John, he kind of presses pause. The genre sort of changes from narrative to kind of commentary, really.

He wants to give us his commentary, John does, on what's been happening so far. It's as if John sort of says, okay, listen here guys, I want to tell you something about what you've been witnessing, what you've been reading.

And we noticed in our last passage last week, the unbelief of the crowds, they wanted a conqueror and they got a cross. They wanted a war-horsed ruler and instead they got a king, humble and seated on a donkey, come to lay his life down.

But only now, really, we get the answer to why that is. And why did they reject him so much? Verse 36, he'd done so many signs for them, they still did not believe.

[5 : 33] Just imagine for a second if you had seen the things they had seen, right? A dead man leaving his own tomb, in chapter 11. A man blind from birth, describing the things he could see in front of him, chapter 9.

And thousands upon thousands fed in the desert, chapter 6. Gallons upon gallons of water turned to wine, chapter 2. Death defeated, hunger removed, illness stopped in its tracks.

Would those things convince you, if you'd seen them in front of you, would that convince you that Jesus was worth taking seriously? Because it wasn't enough to convince these people.

Even though you'd done so many signs before them, they still did not believe. Unbelief and skepticism, they're not a product of the Enlightenment.

It's not that we've got kind of cleverer and cleverer, and all of a sudden thought, you know, we don't need God anymore. Unbelief and skepticism, it's been around right from the beginning of the message.

[6 : 34] And at this point, it really looks like Jesus' message has failed, doesn't it? And we know that John, he wants people to believe. So why on earth don't they, right? What has gone wrong exactly? You might know that if you've looked at John before, he says towards the end of his gospel, he sort of says kind of a sentence on why he's written his book.

A purpose statement, if you like. But I want us to imagine for a second if it read like this. Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, but these are written so that you would not believe in him.

That would be a strange ending to the gospel, wouldn't it? It would be a very strange way to finish this book. These are written so that you would reject Jesus anyway. These are written so that you would see how much of a failure Jesus' ministry was.

Even though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him. What is it that stops the world from believing in its own God? Unbelief like this, it needs an explanation.

And it turns out that there is one. It turns out unbelief, it's not a surprise to Jesus. It is not a surprise to John. And it should not be a surprise to us this morning.

[7 : 45] First point, sorry, it should be on your handouts. That's my mistake. First point, don't be thrown. Unbelief is not a surprise to God. Verse 37 again.

Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the words 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? It turns out that long before Jesus walked the earth, the prophet Isaiah had given Israel a message.

And I'm aware that there are some Isaiah experts in the room this morning, which means you'll be a bit more familiar with it. But don't worry if you're not. Isaiah, he describes the outstretched arm of God who would come to save them and himself be rejected.

And I would have put on the handout for you. Unbelief is not a surprise to God. Firstly, because it was described in advance. Hundreds and hundreds of years before Jesus was around, Isaiah, he tells us plainly that the servant of God would be rejected.

[8 : 52] And he does it in this kind of poetic, rhetorical way, these two questions. Who has believed what he has heard from us? And the expected answer is, well, basically no one.

To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? To which the expected answer is, well, well, not really anyone. I mean, it turns out, well, this rejection described in advance, the saving work of the Lord Jesus, it was always going to be rejected.

And they didn't believe so that, verse 38, the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

And John, he's not embarrassed to say that people thought his message was stupid.

People thought Christianity was ridiculous. And even in the pages of his gospel, the unbelief of the people, it was not a failure of Jesus' message. It was exactly what was expected of them.

And the God of Israel walking in their midst, and them not even recognizing him. Because sometimes it doesn't matter how much evidence you give someone. I wonder if you've come across this experience.

[10:04] And however persuasive your arguments are, or however much historical evidence you provide someone with, unbelief is what you're met with, isn't it, sometimes?

And people just don't want to believe, for whatever reason, you think. But the point is, unbelief, it's not a surprise to God. Don't be thrown. Let me discourage, just because some kind of impressive people, impressive looking people, think your faith is ridiculous.

And don't be surprised, don't be thrown, when the institutions that control our media and power structures think that Jesus is irrelevant. And certainly don't be surprised, just because the institution, the religious institutions of our day, have largely pushed Jesus to the sides, and began to preach a different message altogether.

And God is not shaken by that. And neither should we be shaken. But actually, it's a little bit more serious than that. It's not just that the unbelief of the crowd was described in advance, you know, like I might predict something in advance.

But in fact, for these particular people, and I must stress that for the people here in this story, Jesus goes even further. And unbelief, it was described, but also in this case, unbelief was planned in advance.

[11:29] Look down at verse 39 with me. Therefore, they could not believe. For again, Isaiah said, He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their heart in turn, and I would heal them.

And it turns out that the rejection of Jesus, it wasn't just unsurprising or predicted, but it was planned. And I guess that shocks us, doesn't it, slightly?

What exactly is going on there? You know, God seems to be preventing people from believing.

John, he takes us right back to the beginning of Isaiah chapter 6, this amazing vision that Isaiah sees, a throne room.

And Isaiah himself, he's commissioned to preach to the nation a message, but it is a message that will ultimately leave Israel blind until they can't see anything in front of them, really.

Can't see the truth that's right in front of their eyes. And we're thinking, you know, what on earth is going on here, okay? So it's one thing for God to sort of be aware of the people's unbelief. Know about it in advance, just like I might predict a chess move in advance.

[12:37] But for God to actually be preventing them from believing, I mean, that's just very strange. That doesn't make sense at all. And the clue, really, for what's going on is actually our first Isaiah quote.

He hasn't just plucked a verse from Isaiah out of nowhere that sounds poetic. No, verse 38 was from chapters 52 and 53 of Isaiah, which is a description of the servant that God was going to send to his people.

Quite a famous few chapters. And in that description, Isaiah tells us that it is by being rejected that the servant can save his people. Let me say that again.

It is by Jesus being rejected that he can accomplish his saving work. Listen to Isaiah's words again. Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?

Or to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Just a few verses later. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

[13:39] Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.

And with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray. Everyone turned his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Understandably, famous verses from Isaiah.

And the point is that the unbelief of the people, it was absolutely necessary for Jesus to go to the cross. Well, let me put it a different way. Imagine the scenario where Jesus comes to the world and everyone sees him and just thinks, OK, great, brilliant, wonderful, guys.

It's the Son of God. Here he is, finally. Jesus, we're ready, here we go, let's go. What do you want us to do? Maybe Herod rocks up and says, great, Jesus, I've been waiting for you for so long. Brilliant. Nice to meet you. This is excellent. All working out, really. The Romans kind of wander off and wander in and sort of fall down at their feet in front of him. No problems until Judas doesn't betray him.

[14:48] We have a perfect story. And they all live happily ever after. Hooray. Well, except. Well, what happens now? Well, we have no rejection.

No trial. We have no cross. We have no death. We have no victory. Well, of course, of course the cross had to happen.

And the rejection of the God of Israel as he walked the earth, it was absolutely necessary. Unbelief of the people, it was required to save the world.

In other words, it's not just blindness for the sake of blindness. And my friend Benji, I know he's, some people have hobbies. Benji's hobby is blindness in Isaiah, OK? So if you have a question about that, that's what he's interested in.

Begs beyond belief. I don't know why people do that, but here we go. Blindness at the cross, that gives way to sight on the other side. Or you might think of darkness at the cross, that gives way to light on the other side.

[15:54] And death, that gives way to resurrection. You see, the cross, it is the turning point in history. Unbelief was described way in advance.

And in their particular case, it was planned. So don't be thrown. And don't allow their unbelief to cause you to doubt Jesus' credibility.

That the very thing that looks like it is failing is actually bringing about God's very plan of action. So firstly then, this passage, it is reassuring us not to be thrown by the rejection of Jesus, by his people.

But also, it contains a warning for us. Let me read from verse 42. Nevertheless, many, even of the authorities, believed in him. OK? And you're thinking, brilliant.

OK, this is excellent. Most people reject Jesus. But there are a few that don't, it seems. Except, well, John continues, But for fear of the Pharisees, they did not confess it, so they would not be put out of the synagogue.

[17:02] For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. Now, this is a warning to us, really. A warning that belief, it is not always a good thing.

And that's our final point, really. Don't be thrown, but do be warned. Belief is not always the right kind. And this is true, actually, all the way through John's Gospel. So you might think of the end of chapter 2, where Jesus doesn't entrust himself to people who believe in him, or literally the words are, does not believe his belief, believe their belief.

Or you could think of chapter 6, where it looks like there's a whole crowd eager to crown him king, and they all leave by the end of the chapter. Or chapter 8, where we're told many people believe in Jesus, but by the end of the chapter, those very same people are picking up stones to stone him. And belief is not always a good thing in John. And here we're told explicitly what kind of belief we're dealing with. Verse 42 again. Many of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees, they didn't confess it, so they wouldn't be put out in the synagogue.

For, John says, they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. It turns out they prefer the glory of this world to the glory of the cross.

[18:24] They prefer the life that this world offers. They prefer to stay in the dark, where it is more comfortable. They prefer a world without God, because it just might mean a more comfortable life for them.

And I think that is a warning to us. It's not that there's no hope for these people, right? They do believe in Jesus, which is a good start. But we do need to be careful that we don't fall into the same trap of caring more about our reputation here, our livelihoods, our world prospects, than the glory of the world to come.

And what's the problem? It seems to be cancelled culture, doesn't it? Verse 42. Fear of being put out of the synagogue, being excluded from the inner circle, fear of being outcast, fear of looking

stupid, losing your credibility, fear of your friends rejecting you, fear of being isolated from the world. So instead, well, they prefer to stay quiet in view of an easier life. You know, just keep your head down. It's very easy to do that in lockdown, I think. Just kind of hunker down. Don't really engage with the world around me.

Just stay within the four walls of my own home and hope my unpopular views don't cause me too much trouble. And the approval of others, it is a very tempting thing.

[19 : 42] And it's a warning. And belief can be shallow. Because the reality is, the cross-shaped life, well, it means death to my comforts.

It means losing our lives, Jesus said in verse 25 last week. And our response to this message, it forces us to be uncomfortable. It exposes the kind of lives we want to live, the kind of glory that we're drawn to.

So we started by talking about what stops the world from believing. Well, I guess this is what would stop us from believing, isn't it? If we're not careful. And they love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

But it also means that we don't have to be experts in cultural analysis to understand what puts people off Jesus. You know, understanding technology and the changes in the cultural landscape, the secularization of the West, engaging in the meaning crisis, they're all very valuable things to do to some extent.

But this message, the message of the cross, is the dividing line. And when people are confronted with the message of the cross, it will push them in one of two directions.

[20 : 59] And we should not be surprised for a second when people don't believe, when people reject the message. However strong our apologetics, however persuasive our evangelistic talks are, out of the poetic and moving our sermons.

If we love the wrong kind of glory, we will reject the God who made us and we will be left in the dark. It is what happened in Isaiah's time.

It's what happened at Jesus' time. And it is happening now. Even as I speak these words, people are being drawn away from the message of the cross in favor of a life that is simpler, a life seeking the glory that comes from man.

Don't be surprised. And unbelief, it was described way in advance. And in their case, it was necessary. It was planned. So don't be thrown. But do be warned.

And belief is not always the right kind. And if you're wondering, you know, what kind of, what hope is there for a world like this? For a world plunged in darkness, a world that refuses to believe.

[22 : 12] Well, Jesus, he opens his mouth in a second and he gives some of the most glorious and comforting words of hope and light. But we will look at them next week together.

For now, why don't I pray for us as we close? Heavenly Father, thank you for these words, for the words that show us your great salvation at the cross.

And despite a tragic rejection, a world that rejected the God that made them, we pray that you would give us eyes to see how glorious, how precious, how victorious is your son's work.

Please help us to fear you above all else. Help us to love the glory that comes from God more than the glory that comes from man. In your name we pray.

Amen.