

“Whoever Believes in Me”

The Forty-Second in a series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 12:37-50; Isaiah 6:1-13

Jesus entered Jerusalem to the great fanfare of the people. In their minds, God’s promised messianic blessing is playing out before their very eyes. Jesus, the Davidic king and miracle worker has entered the royal city, no doubt, to claim the throne of David and to lead the people of Israel to victory over Rome. Jesus proclaimed that his hour had come. Surely, Jesus was referring to his entrance into the city and the beginning of his reign. But those who watched and listened carefully to Jesus after he entered the city knew that Jesus was not about to meet the crowd’s expectations. In fact, Jesus said his hour referred to something soon to come, that he would be glorified, that a time of judgment would come when he is “lifted up” and draws all people unto himself. At the end of John 12, we learn that time of judgment mentioned by Jesus begins when his public ministry comes to a close, and Jesus withdraws from the public eye. Having ended his public ministry, Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for his departure from them. What the people of Israel thought to be a time of God’s blessing was, in reality, the beginning of God’s judgment upon Israel, when the messianic light departs, and the darkness of spiritual judgment falls upon the people who cheer for a Messiah in whom they do not believe, and who’s mission they do not understand.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we have spent the last several weeks working our way through the twelfth chapter of John. We have considered Mary’s anointing of Jesus with expensive perfume in preparation for his death and burial. We have read of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and then we have considered our Lord’s remarkable words to a group of Greeks (Gentile God-fearers) who were in Jerusalem to witness the coming Passover.

Previously in John’s account, Jesus had only spoken of his hour—when he will be glorified—as a future event. Remarkably, he tells a group of Gentiles that his hour has come, meaning his messianic mission is coming to its end. When Jesus spoke these words about his hour having arrived, people assumed that he was referring to his triumphal entrance into the city. But he was not speaking of Palm Sunday. Instead, Jesus was speaking of events soon to come—his death and resurrection. Using the analogy of a grain of wheat which falls into the ground and then germinates, Jesus is speaking of how he must die, and then be raised from the dead. He speaks of how those who follow him must lose their lives in order to receive his (eternal life). Jesus did not sound like a man about to lead Israel to victory over Rome

As he was speaking to the Greeks (and probably to the disciples as well) a crowd gathered, listening to Jesus’ teaching about the significance of the events they had just witnessed. Jesus describes the great anguish of his soul because his hour has come, implying that he must suffer and die for our sins. Jesus then calls upon YHWH to be glorified through the events about to unfold. The Father speaks from heaven, confirming that Jesus’ is indeed fulfilling the will of God. The crowd heard the noise, knew it to be extraordinary (if not supernatural), but did not understand the words spoken. But Jesus knew that his heavenly Father was speaking, and Jesus reveals to those listening what the Father had said.

Upon hearing the Father’s voice, in verse 31, Jesus announces “*now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.*” Two times in this verse Jesus speaks of what his impending death and resurrection will accomplish *now*. When Jesus suffers and dies upon the cross, God will save his people from the guilt and power of sin. At the same time, his death upon the cross is a graphic picture to

the world of how seriously God takes human sin. As a sign of judgment, the cross tells all people that either Jesus Christ suffers and dies for the sinner, and in the sinner's place, or else the sinner must be punished by God for their guilt of their own sins. While the cross is the visible sign of God's love and grace toward his people, it is also the guarantee to those who reject Jesus' person and work that God will judge the world on the last day—yet as we will see in our text, that judgment (at least upon Israel), is about to begin.

Jesus also announces that his death and resurrection mark the defeat of Satan, who is now “cast down” from heaven to earth. As Paul tells us in Colossians 2:13-15, *“and you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”* When Jesus dies upon the cross, the judgment of the world is guaranteed, as is the final defeat of Satan, who is about to be cast down from heaven, and as a result, can no longer accuse the brethren. Satan is enraged, knowing that the day of judgment when he will be cast into the Lake of Fire is guaranteed. When Jesus dies and is raised from the dead the final outcome of human history is secured. This is why we can speak of Easter as the birthday of the new creation.

Jesus also cites the prophecy of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and applies it to himself. Jesus speaks of being “lifted up” from the first verse of the suffering servant prophecy—a prophetic reference to his death upon the cross in the place of sinners (the substitutionary atonement). John tells us that this is an indication of what kind of death Jesus was going to die. Jesus also declares that when he is “lifted up,” he will draw all people unto himself. This is a reference to the fact that Jesus will soon commission his church to go into all the nations and preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth, of which the Gentiles who asked these questions of Jesus are among the first.

But Jesus' reference to the suffering servant of Isaiah is also confusing to those listening to him. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem clearly demonstrates that Jesus is Israel's Messiah. But throughout his messianic ministry, Jesus has also identified himself the “Son of Man,” a divine figure who is tied to an eternal kingdom in Daniel 7:13-14, to which Jesus is referring. How can the Messiah—given his eternal reign—also be the suffering servant depicted by Isaiah? The suffering servant is a lowly figure, who apparently, will die for the guilt of the sins of his people. The crowds which gathered that day to listen to Jesus, are having a very difficult time making sense of these seemingly contradictory images—which is why Jesus does not answer the crowds when they question him. Jesus knows that the answers to these questions will come with his death and resurrection just days away.

As I have been mentioning from the time we discussed the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11), many people had seen Jesus' miracles, had actually witnessed Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, or had seen Lazarus after he had been raised. John tells us that many of these people believed in Jesus. That this was the case and that huge crowds now followed Jesus everywhere he went, caused great consternation among the members of the Sanhedrin, who were afraid that all of this would bring down the wrath of their Roman occupiers who would remove them from power. Fearing the Romans and jealous of Jesus' popularity, the Sanhedrin began plotting in earnest to put Jesus to death. They issued the command that if anyone saw Jesus, or knew where he was, they were to report it to the Sanhedrin, so that Jesus could be arrested and then put to death. But when Jesus entered Jerusalem to the cheering multitudes on Palm Sunday, it was clear that the Sanhedrin would have to re-think their plans.

As we have seen, Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem is not what it seems. Although a huge crowd spontaneously assembled, cheered him on his way, sang messianic anthems, and believed that Jesus was

entering Jerusalem as Israel's Messiah, the sad fact is, they missed the whole point. They expect Jesus to claim David's throne and return the nation to greatness. Jesus knows he will suffer and die for our sins. Even as the people cheer for Jesus, their loyalty and devotion to Jesus is very shallow and not grounded in faith in God's promise that one day YHWH will deal with human sin, once and for all. Sadly, as they enthusiastically welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, they will just as easily turn upon him, when he turns out not to be the kind of king the people want or expect. By Friday, many of these same people will be demanding his crucifixion. Although John has recounted that many had believed in him, we now learn that many more did not. When Jesus focuses upon dealing with the curse and human sin (not with the Romans) the nation of Israel, by and large, rejects him. Jesus is not who the people thought him to be.

Israel's rejection of Jesus is theme of the final verses of John 12, which in John's Gospel, marks the end of Jesus' public ministry. At the end of verse 36, John informs us "*when Jesus had said these things,*" [the discourse we just summarized] *he departed and hid himself from them.*" When Jesus withdraws from the crowds after the Feast of Tabernacles it was not because he was afraid that the Sanhedrin was plotting to kill him, but that his hour was not yet. But the with coming of the Passover, however, Jesus' hour has come. He has said all he was going to say to the crowds. The time has come for Jesus to withdraw from public scrutiny to privately prepare his disciples for his death, resurrection, and ascension. But his withdrawal from the public is also the first hint of the judgment about to come upon Israel, as Jesus will soon explain to the twelve. He will tell them that it is good that he departs from them, for a greater era of blessing will dawn after his departure (his ascension into heaven),

At the end of the public phase of Jesus' ministry, John summarizes a number of things Jesus has said. John describes the tragic state of affairs regarding Israel in verses 37-39a. The reality is quite different from the public response to Jesus, who has raised Lazarus from the dead just days before, and then entered Jerusalem in apparent triumph. John tells us that "*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: 'Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' Therefore they could not believe.*" To those to whom God had granted eternal life, Jesus' miracles serve to confirm faith. Jesus' miracles are the proof that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the Son of God—the coming one to whom the Old Testament had pointed.

But to those whom God leaves in spiritual darkness and unbelief, the miracles are a form of judgment. For those who lack the eyes of faith, Jesus' miracles are merely a sign that Jesus is the one to lead the nation against the Romans. Left to themselves, the people do not see that the miracles are actually the sign that God is about to undo the effects of Adam's fall and human sin. The miracles do demonstrate that Jesus is a miracle worker and someone who might lead them to victory. But the people have secularized the biblical messianic expectations, and now see the messianic prophecies in purely political terms. They want Jesus to defeat Rome—they don't care that Jesus came to deal with human sin.

In his summary comments at the end of this chapter, John makes it clear that Jesus' ministry has not failed—a question some might raise given the fact that Jesus has gone so far as to raise a man from the dead who had been dead four days and yet his own people still do not believe that he has come to save them from the guilt and power of sin. Has Jesus failed? Has he not accomplished his purpose? On the contrary, John points out that Jesus' messianic mission has come to its divinely-appointed end, exactly as the prophets had foretold that it would. Isaiah predicted this in the prophecy of the suffering servant (53:1). The suffering servant will indeed be rejected by his people, but is then highly exalted by YHWH.

John reminds his readers/hearers that Jesus has preached the specific message YHWH has given him to the people of Israel. Yet, the nation is in the process of rejecting their own Messiah. Mind you, John says this

while huge crowds are still following Jesus, excited about his presence in the city and basking in the joy of his recent and triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. But the people of Israel, its king (Herod), and its governing council (the Sanhedrin), with a few notable exceptions, have not believed Jesus' message and have misunderstood his messianic mission (not trusting in him as Savior from sin). Even though the strong arm of the Lord has been revealed through Jesus' miracles, the people are rejecting him as their Savior. All of this, John says, was foretold in the Old Testament.

As a result of God not granting people eternal life, and as a consequence of his leaving them in the darkness and bondage of sin into which they were born, John says they "*could not believe.*" This is what sin has done to the human race, now fallen in Adam. Sin darkens our thinking, clouds our judgment, twists our emotions, and makes the world center around "self" (ourselves). We must keep in mind that in Israel's case, the people have heard Jesus with their own ears. They have witnessed the Lord's miracles with their own eyes. The covenant curses—threatened upon Israel throughout the Old Testament—are about to be meted out, beginning with Jesus' withdrawal from the public eye. As John tells us in verses 40-41, "*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.*" The people of Israel have seen and heard, yet do not believe. God's judgment will come upon his rebellious people, just as Jesus has announced.

John cites from Isaiah 6:10 (part of our Old Testament lesson) in reference to God spiritually blinding and hardening the hearts of the people. As Isaiah 6 opens, recall that the prophet is given a vision of the heavenly throne, which, in turn, moves the prophet to realize his own sin and to seek forgiveness. As a result, Isaiah is commissioned by YHWH to preach to Israel, even though Israel will reject the word from YHWH that the prophet brings to the people. Through the word which YHWH sends to Israel through the prophet, the people's hearts are hardened. This is a form of judgment associated with the covenant curses. This is what Jesus means, in part, when he says *now* the judgment of the world is at hand. When Jesus dies upon the cross to save the people of God, this is taken by those who do not believe as a sign of weakness. Looking upon the spectacle of a crucified Savior who cannot give them the military victory they want, the nation rejects Jesus, thereby ensuring God's judgment in the events of AD 70, when Jerusalem is sacked and the temple destroyed by the Romans, and the Jews are dispersed into the nations of the earth. Israel's rejection of the Messiah is a terrible tragedy.

We must not think of God's hardening the hearts of the people as a passive thing—i.e., that he merely withholds grace, and then the people harden their own hearts. Isaiah tells us that at some point YHWH uses his word (which he previously intended as the means to save) as a form of judgment which further hardens the hearts of those already in darkness. God is not hardening the hearts of people who are potential believers (neutral toward God) who can come to faith on their own (apart from grace). Nor is he hardening people's hearts who are indifferent to the things of the Lord. The people of Israel come under YHWH's covenant judgment only after countless times in which YHWH has graciously sent his prophets to call the people to repentance and offer them forgiveness. The people of Israel repeatedly and maliciously refuse to listen to the message YHWH gives them, and as we see in the history of Israel, at times they even reject the messenger (the prophets God sends to warn them). The irony is that more the opportunities YHWH gives them to repent, the more they harden themselves against him.

At some point, YHWH's longsuffering mercy has run its course. The time for judgment has come with the end of Jesus' messianic mission. The mode of God's judgment, ironically, is the same word of forgiveness which now brings judgment (not salvation). The people do not want Jesus to save them from their sin. They love the darkness, John says, because their deeds are evil. They want Jesus to lead them to victory over Rome. When he does not, they crucify him. And so when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, the cross

becomes both a sign and instrument of God's judgment upon unbelievers. As John reminds us, *"Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him."* Isaiah saw the glory of God, which is now revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, through which God accomplishes his sovereign purposes. In this case, Jesus will simultaneously secure the salvation of God's people, and bring about judgment on all those who reject him. To put it another way, when Jesus withdraws from the public eye, Israel's time is up. Those who love the darkness will be prevented from seeing the light. Those who seek political salvation, will be crushed by Roman armies.

Again, John wants his readers/hearers to understand that Jesus' mission has not failed. Although the nation as a whole will soon reject Jesus, there are also those in the process of coming to faith. As John tells us in verses 42-43, *"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."* Many of those believing in Jesus at this time, were also counting the cost they would pay for following Jesus. The "authorities" probably refers to people we have already encountered such as Nicodemus—although we never do learn that he came to faith. Joseph of Arimathea, who provides Jesus with a tomb, is probably among this group as well. If one follows Jesus there will be a price to pay—removal from the synagogue. The Pharisees will see to that. This is the reality for any members of the Sanhedrin, the party of the Pharisees, or the priests and elders. While things will change after Jesus' death and resurrection, nevertheless, the fear of what others will think if we follow Christ was a serious an issue then, as it is now. Do we seek the glory of God, or the praise of men? This is a question we must continually ask ourselves.

In verses 35-36, Jesus told the crowd *"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. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light."* Now that Jesus is about to withdraw from the public eye (which is what he meant when he said the light remains but a little while longer), John gives us a summary of Jesus' final words before that darkness falls upon Israel. There is a marked sense of urgency and finality to his words.

According to John (vv. 44-45), *"Jesus cried out and said, 'Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.'"* To believe in Jesus (i.e., to trust in him for salvation) is to believe in God (to trust that God will save us through his son, Jesus). To "believe" in Jesus involves much than merely acknowledging that Jesus once lived, was a good man, and perhaps even a prophet. To believe in Jesus (in the biblical sense of the word) is to trust in him for deliverance from the guilt of sin—that Jesus died for you and in your place while suffering upon the cross, that when you trust in him, the guilt of your sin is reckoned to him, and his perfect obedience is imputed (reckoned, or credited) to you. To believe in Jesus, in this sense, is to believe in God.

If we flip this around (so as to see the full ramifications of Jesus' assertion), to truly believe in God, one must accept Jesus' claims that he is Israel's Messiah, the Son of God, and the only Savior of humanity. So, when someone says they believe in God, but do not accept Jesus' claims about God, Jesus himself says, they do not believe in God in the biblical sense of what it means "to believe." We must understand that Jesus is making a truth claim—what he says is either true or false. It is not self-righteous Christians who made up the claim that Christianity alone is the true religion, and that there is no salvation apart from faith (trust) in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus himself who makes this statement. And it is Jesus who rose again from the dead to confirm the truth of his claim. Although the contemporary use of the word "faith" is pretty vague, in the New Testament, "to believe" (verb) or "faith" (the noun) is a very specific thing—to trust in Jesus Christ, to reply upon *him* to save *you*. To believe what Jesus says and does to save you from your sin is to believe in God. To deny Jesus' claim, is not to believe in God (in the sense of trusting that

God sent Jesus to be the only Savior from sin). If you are not clear about the fact that faith in Jesus Christ is faith in God, and to believe in God is to trust in Jesus, then you are not clear about the gospel.

In verse 46, Jesus goes on to say, *“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”* Jesus now tells us that the essence of his messianic mission is to reveal the saving purposes of God. As he told us in John 8:12, *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* A great deal more light has been revealed in the teaching discourses in John’s Gospel from John 8 to John 12. Jesus has warned all those listening to him that darkness is about to fall. Jesus is telling Israel, the crowds, the Greeks, his disciples (and his readers/hearers), that **now** the moment of decision has come. His hour has come. The light remains for but a moment. Darkness is at hand. Believe in Jesus, or remain in darkness. As he himself says, *“this is why I have come into the world,”* to reveal this very thing.

Faith (as Jesus defines it) is not mere assent to the truth of certain propositions—such as I believe that there is a God, or that Jesus actually lived. The faith which trusts in Jesus (and in the Father) is a living faith which is willing to give up one’s own righteousness and to claim Christ’s as one’s own. But what about those currently in the process of coming to faith in Jesus, but who feared what the Sanhedrin would do if it was discovered that someone was a believer in Jesus? Jesus addresses that matter in verses 47-48. *“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. 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.”* Once again, Jesus opens the ground under people’s feet and forces them to decide.

Those who hear Jesus’ words (i.e., those who give assent to the truth of his message, i.e., that Jesus is from God and a prophet), but do not “keep them” (those who are afraid to publically identify with Jesus because of their fear of what the Sanhedrin and Pharisees will do to them), now face a decision as Jesus leaves the scene. This comment fleshes out what Jesus means when he said his disciples must be willing to die, in order to receive the new life he freely offers sinners. The fate of unbelievers is clear—those who reject Jesus’ words as true or relevant. Such will be judged by the words that Jesus has spoken but which they now reject. But to those who give assent, but who do not trust, they must carefully consider the fate of those who reject Jesus, while at the same time knowing that Jesus has been sent by God. Those who know the facts of the gospel to be true, but who do not personally trust the Savior, face the same judgment as those who reject the truth. With Jesus, there is no middle ground. Either you trust in him to save you from your sins, and pay the price to do so, or else you are no different from an unbeliever.

In case there were still any doubts, in verses 49-50, Jesus concludes by reminding his hearers of his divine authority to speak to these most important of all questions—namely eternal life and eternal punishment. Says Jesus, *“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. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”* The words which Jesus speaks are the words give him by the Father. What Jesus says, God says. His words explain and grant eternal life. His messianic mission to Israel is over. The time has come for Jesus to withdraw from public, which is the beginning of God’s judgment upon Israel.

Speaking with the authority of YHWH, Jesus says to us, *“whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me.”* To believe in God means to believe in Jesus. To trust in Jesus is to believe in God. Anything else, Jesus says, is unbelief.