

John 12:34-50 Why People Don't Believe In Jesus

Introduction: *Do you ever wonder why you believe in Jesus, but your neighbor doesn't? Is it because he simply hasn't heard? Is because he just hasn't studied the evidence for Christianity? Is it because you had a better upbringing? Is it because you are smarter than he is? Is it because you are more spiritually sensitive than he is? Are you a better person than he is?* John, in essence, dealt with this issue in his commentary on why the crowds in Jerusalem didn't believe in Jesus.

Literary Purpose: It was important for John to explain to his readers why it was that the Jewish leadership and the majority of the Jewish people did not believe in Jesus. *If the Jewish people who were right there with Jesus, and who saw His miracles and heard His teachings, did not believe in Jesus, why should you?* On the surface, their rejection of Jesus seemed to threaten the credibility of who Jesus claimed to be.

******What words did Jesus use to predict His crucifixion (12:27-36a)?** Jesus said He would be "lifted up" (12:32-34), a reference not to His resurrection, but rather to the Roman practice of lifting a condemned person up in the air nailed to a cross.

Review: What can we learn about Jesus' mission on earth from 12:27b? He came to die. That was His purpose in coming. His death was necessary in order to pay for the sins of His people.

What theological problem did the crowd immediately voice in 12:34a? Unlike the disciples, the crowd heard Jesus loud and clear when He said He was going to be crucified. Their understanding of Scripture was that once the Christ came, He would forever reign victorious over Israel's enemies.

What did they mean when they asked, "Who is *this* Son of Man" (12:34b, italics mine)? Son of Man is a Messianic title. Perhaps they were asking Jesus what kind of false, misguided, crazy Christ Jesus was claiming to be that would die.

Where did the crowd get the idea that the Christ remains forever (12:34)? They got it directly from the Hebrew Scriptures. It does indeed teach that. However, they failed to understand the whole of the Scriptures regarding the Christ's mission and reign. The fact of the matter is that Isaiah had predicted the death of the Messiah years beforehand. For example:

ESV **Isaiah 53:3-5** He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

Literary Purpose: This is the same sort of question John's readers would want the answer to before they committed to believing in Jesus.¹ In their thinking, a dead Messiah was a failed Messiah. Under the leading of the Holy Spirit, John knew it was necessary to deal with this objection. John thus records both Jesus' response and then adds his own insight.

What advice did Jesus offer in response to their problem (12:35-36a)? Rather than try to correct their theology, Jesus advised that they walk in the light they had already received from Him (Jesus Himself being the light).

ESV John 1:4-9 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it . . . The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

With His "light" answer, Jesus was effectively directing the crowd from the theological realm into the moral realm.² This suggests that their real problem was not theological; it was moral. The real obstacle to people believing the Gospel is not ultimately a head problem; it is a heart problem.

How did Jesus give a sense of urgency to His words (12:35-36a)? Twice Jesus said, "while" they had the light, clearing indicating there would be a time when they didn't have the light. He also said that darkness was coming and would overtake them (as in master).

Example: Suppose you are out hiking in the woods. It will take you one hour to hike out to your car, and in one hour it will be dark. There is nothing you can do to stop it the sun from setting and the dark from coming. So, rather than sit down and picnic, wasting the hour of light that is left, most people would hike determinedly toward the car, so that the darkness does not overtake them along the trail. So too, Jesus (the light) was leaving earth no matter what they did. His advice was for them to believe in Him while they still had His light, lest spiritual darkness overtake them and they remain spiritually lost.

Application: Jesus implied that there was a limited window of opportunity, a time of light, for the people to whom He spoke to believe—then would come darkness. The idea of darkness overtaking you is that it masters you. We must not presume upon God's grace. Complacency will make you end up in Hell. Many people today put off believing in Jesus. There are sinful things they want to do right now that they know are incompatible with Jesus' teachings. Later, they say, they might accept Christ. The danger with this type of thinking is that tomorrow may never come.

ESV 2 Corinthians 6:1b-2 "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

¹ Carson, *John*, 446.

² Brown, *John*, 479.

******Despite the many signs Jesus did (raising Lazarus, God the Father’s voice booming out of heaven), the people *still* did not believe. According to John, what was the prophetic significance of their unbelief (12:36b-43)?** Their unbelief was a fulfillment of prophecies made by Isaiah about 700 years previous.

Why did Jesus hide himself from them (12:36b)? Jesus effectively ended His interaction with crowd on a note of challenge (walk and believe in the light), then to dramatically illustrate the idea of the light going out, Jesus hid Himself.³ It was as if His ministry of revelation to Israel was done. Now, God’s judgment was imminent.⁴

ESV **1 Samuel 4:21** . . . she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" because the ark of God had been captured . . .

Application: It is a terrible thing for Jesus to hide himself from you.

ESV **Isaiah 55:6** Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near . . .

What sad truth did John bring out in 12:37? These people willfully rejected the light they had been given and refused to believe in Jesus. Again, it was a heart problem, not a head problem.

Look at 12:28 very carefully; *why* did they not believe? They did not believe “so that” the words of Isaiah would be fulfilled.

Zero in on the words “so that” (12:38). What function do the words “so that” serve in a sentence? The Greek behind “so that” is *hina*, which means “in order that” or “so that” and shows purpose or result.

Example: I wash my hands so that they’ll be clean. Washing causes them to be clean. Isaiah prophesied so that they would not believe.

Did Isaiah’s prophecy merely predict their unbelief or did it cause their unbelief?
Grammatically, what it says is that the prophecy *caused* their unbelief.

What’s the difference between saying they “did” not believe in 12:37 and they “could” not believe in 12:39? One is a statement of fact and the other is a statement of ability. The word “could” (“could not believe”) is from the Greek root *dunatai*. It means can, be able to, be capable of. It has to do with ability. This same root is found in:

ESV **John 6:44a** No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

Moses recorded a similar idea about the people of His generation:

ESV **Deuteronomy 29:2-4** Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: “You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all

³ Brown, *John*, 479.

⁴ *ESV Study*, 2049.

his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.”

In 12:39, what function does the word “therefore” serve (what’s the “therefore” there for)? Its function is to tie 12:39 together with what goes before it (12:26b-38). The “therefore” explains again why it is they did not believe.

According to 12:39, why was it that they did not believe (12:37)? The reason they did not believe is because they could not believe, 12:39.

Again: Let’s talk about cause and effect: Did Isaiah prophesy their unbelief because they did not believe, or did they not believe because Isaiah prophesied their unbelief? They did not believe because it was prophesied by Isaiah that they would not believe, 12:38. Their unbelief was specifically “so that” the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled, 12:38.

According to 12:40, what role did God play in their unbelief? It is explicitly stated that God blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts. Be careful not to create a God of your own imagination. Too many people dismiss God as a doting, grandfatherly figure, appreciative of any spare time you can give Him. It’s not as if Aslan were a tame lion.

According to 12:40, why did God blind their eyes and harden their hearts? It was lest they see and understand, and turn, and be healed. A similar statement was made elsewhere:

ESV 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12 . . . God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

ESV Romans 9:18 . . . he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

NAS Romans 11:22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God . . .

Inconvenient Truth: The reality is that God simply is *not* an equal opportunity redeemer. Many people object, saying, “I don’t like that kind of a God” or “That’s not fair” or “I won’t worship a God like that”. Sorry, but if that’s really the way it is, that’s just the way it is.

ESV Matthew 5:25-26 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to **court**, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

If disastrous consequences are possible in the human legal system, how much more if God is our accuser? We owe God a debt we can never repay; we need to be reconciled with Him before judgment day. Just be thankful you are not one of those He hardened.

You’d better come to terms with it. The Japanese did not like the idea of surrendering at the end of World War Two, but the reality of the atomic bomb brought them to their senses. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien wrote, “It does not do to leave a dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him”.

Perspective: “God’s judicial hardening is not the capricious manipulation of an arbitrary Sovereign toward morally neutral or good people, but rather His holy condemnation of guilty people.”⁵ We have all been charged with a capital crime, been convicted as guilty in a fair trial, and sentenced to death. But the governor has decided to grant mercy to a few of us. I suppose some criminals might refuse the mercy unless all criminals get it, but most would gratefully accept it. When Corrie ten Boom was unexpectedly released from the concentration camp, she didn’t refuse to leave unless all the others were released. The face of the matter is that she had no choice in the matter; they would have ejected her from the camp if she refused.

What commentary did John offer in 12:41? John pointed out to his readers that these things were the fulfillment of prophecy. It shows that Jesus’ rejection was part of God’s sovereign plan. As John stated at the beginning:

ESV **John 1:11** He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Insight on the Deity & Sovereignty of Jesus:

- 1) **To whom does “his” and “him” refer in 12:41. Whose glory did Isaiah see?** Isaiah saw Jesus’ glory.
- 2) **A pronoun like “his” or “him” (12:41) normally refers back to the immediately preceding subject in 12:40, which is who?** It was the same “He” who blinded and hardened. Jesus is the One who blinds and hardens.⁶
- 3) **In 12:40, to whom does the pronoun “he” refer?** It refers back to the “Lord” (12:38), which in the Hebrew of Isaiah 53:1 is Jehovah (translated LORD). This is a clear reference to the deity of Christ.

Application: If you, like Isaiah, have seen the glory of the Lord in Jesus (who is Jehovah), that is divine revelation from God, a work of grace in your life.

Literary Analysis: There are three levels of significance to John’s writing. The first, and lowest level, concerns the mere record of historical events. The second, and more important level, are Jesus’ comments. The third level, and of most importance, is John’s interpretation of both the historical events and Jesus’ comments.

Despite wholesale unbelief by the crowd, what was true of many of the authorities (12:42-43)? They believed in Jesus, but were afraid to admit it.

Do you think theirs was a saving faith (12:42-43)? To answer this, consider these texts:

ESV **Matthew 10:33** . . . whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

ESV **Mark 8:38** . . . whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

⁵ Steven J. Cole, “Lesson 69: Why People Don’t Believe in Jesus (John 12:36b-43)”, Bible.org. Accessed February 27, 2020.

⁶ Carson, *John*, 449.

ESV **Romans 10:9** . . . if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Literary Purpose: John directed this information at any of his own readers who already believed in Jesus, but were afraid to let it be known, to motivate them to not be ashamed of Jesus.

******What authority did Jesus claim in 12:44-50?** Jesus claimed to come and speak, not on His own authority, but on behalf of God the Father.

Since Jesus hid himself from the crowd (12:36b), to whom did He cry out in 12:44? Perhaps John included a review here of what Jesus had been saying to the crowds all along. It was a final notice of coming judgment. Though this seems out of place, it is evidently Jesus' final public challenge to the crowds (maybe a different crowd than the one He hid from?).⁷

According to 12:44, if you believe in Jesus, who do you really believe in? You ultimately believe in God the Father.

ESV **John 13:20** . . . whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.

According to 12:45, if you had seen Jesus when He was here, who else would you have seen? You would also have seen God the Father. Jesus is as much of God as you will ever see.

ESV **John 14:8-9a** Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

Trinity: Jesus and the Father are not the same person. They are clearly distinct. The doctrine of the Trinity is that there is one God who exists in three persons. It has been said that if you try to explain it you'll lose your mind, but if you deny it you'll lose your soul. We will never understand it, which is why the cults deny it; they want a simple God they can explain. The Trinity has been summarized thusly: 1) God is three persons. 2) Each person is fully God. 3). There is only one God.⁸

Based on 12:46, why did Jesus come into the world as light? It was so that everyone who believes may not be in darkness.

ESV **1 John 1:5** This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Who will ultimately judge those who reject Jesus' words (12:47-50)? They will be judged by God the Father. Jesus did not come to judge the world, but rather to save some out of it, the first time. The next time He comes, He will come in judgment on behalf of the Father.

⁷ Carson, *John* 451.

⁸ Steven J. Cole, "Lesson 70: The Final Notice (John 12:44-50)", Bible.org. Accessed February 27, 2020.

ESV **Acts 17:31** [God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

What commandment did the Father give Jesus to speak (12:49-50)? The commandment concerned eternal life.

ESV **John 12:47** 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.

Application: To reject what Jesus said is to forfeit eternal life. The reason Jesus' words are so final is because they are the words of the Father.⁹

So What?

How was what John wrote in chapter 12 designed to cause an unbelieving Jew to believe in Jesus?

1. Despite many signs, the majority of people still did not believe in Him, a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.
2. God actively hardened people so that they could not believe.
3. Many of the authorities actually did believe in Jesus, but were afraid to confess it because of the Pharisees.
4. To believe Jesus is to believe the Father and have eternal life. To reject Jesus is to reject the Father and be liable to judgment.

ESV **Deuteronomy 32:46b-47a** Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life . . .

**** = Ask this question before reading the text. This will engage people's minds and focus their attention.

•You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.com/NTRF.

•Stephen E. Atkerson
NTRF.org
Revised 03/01/2020

⁹ Carson, *John*, 452.