

### Exegesis

**Vs. 37-41** – With Jesus' closing remarks, so too comes the close of his public ministry and a close to the first half of John's account.<sup>1</sup> But, before the story continues and we're given a peek into the Lord's last few moments with his disciples, our faithful narrator mounts the stage and begins to address his audience. And he does so to answer a question that not only bothered many in his day but many others throughout history, and still many more today: "Why didn't the masses believe in Jesus?"

John mentions that even though Jesus "had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him...." In this, John was, precisely, referencing the seven miracles that he had recorded in his own account: water to wine (cf. 2:1-11), this official's son healed (cf. 4:46-54), invalid made to walk (cf. 5:1-18), feeding of the 5,000 (cf. 6:5-14), walking on water (cf. 6:16-21), the blind man given sight (cf. 9:1-7), and, Jesus' magnum opus, the resurrection of Lazarus (cf. 11:1-45). In the author's estimation, just those seven miracles should've been sufficient enough to convince the masses that Jesus was the Christ. Doubtless, if one also included the many other miracles recorded in the Synoptics, there is so much evidence that the fact that there were any unbelievers at all is a remarkable thing, begging for an explanation. Indeed, God left no doubt as to who Jesus was and what he came to do. And this is precisely John's point. The quality and quantity alone should've elicited faith.<sup>2</sup> So, why didn't it?

Because, contrary to what unbelievers might claim, what they often lack is not sufficient proof but simple faith.<sup>3</sup> To show this, John turns to the O.T. and quotes from Isaiah 53:1 by saying, "That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The Israelite's rejection of God's word and plan is well-documented throughout the O.T. God, in times past, sent holy messengers to call his people back to himself and, instead of repenting, the vast majority rejected the prophets, even going so far as to kill them. And just as the prophets, like Isaiah, were rejected by the people, so, too, was Jesus' rejected by Israel (cf. Mat. 23:29-36). Thus, the rejection and ultimate murder of Jesus isn't something new at all. In fact, within the biblical context, it's painfully predictable and was even prophesied. As Carson writes, "...this

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<sup>1</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 389.

<sup>2</sup> Morris (1995), p. 536.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say we should not engage with the evidence. We must base our faith on the evidence presented to us. But, at some point, we must make a judgment call. Will we believe or reject the evidence before us? Either way, this is an act of faith. The choice is whether we'll put our faith in God and his word or put our trust in ourselves and our judgment.

unbelief was not only foreseen by Scripture but on that very account *necessitated* by Scripture."<sup>4</sup> Though Jesus had given the people a good "report" and revealed "the arm of the Lord," the Jews still refused to believe.<sup>5</sup> Or, as the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. The Jews have clearly been drawn to Jesus but refuse to take the living water (cf. 4:10). Isaiah foresaw this eventuality. And such a decision, whether foretold or not, has *grave* consequences.

This is why, in light of the people's ardent faithlessness, John says, "Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them." Here, John is quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10 which demonstrates God's response to man's irresponsibility. Many N.T. authors point to this passage when explaining Israel's unbelief (cf. Mar. 4:12; Mat. 13:13-15; Ac. 28:27).<sup>6</sup> If the Jews in Isaiah's day refused to believe despite the clear testimony of God's word and work, God would not only give them over to their unbelief (cf. Rom. 1:24-28), but he, himself, will also have a hand in it.<sup>7</sup> Do we think God acted differently when, in Jesus' day, the Israelites refused to believe not the word of some prophet but the clear testimony of his own Son (cf. Mar. 12:1-12)?

This does not mean that man's disobedience is God's doing. Why would God compel us to sin when he knows mankind is prone to sin already? Rather, hearts that harden themselves are in danger of being further set against by God. The Lord will work out his goodwill with or without us. But should we work against God's goodwill, we should not be surprised that we become even more resistant and unyielding when God continues to do and accomplish his goodwill (cf. 2 Thess. 2:11).<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere in Scripture is God's sovereignty pitted against man's free will.<sup>9</sup> From cover to cover, the Bible teaches that divine activity and human agency are both at play in faith. Admittedly, it is hard to grasp how the two can coexist. The only way to resolve this tension would be to

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<sup>4</sup> Carson (1991), p. 447.

<sup>5</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 216.

<sup>6</sup> Keener (2012), 2:883; Carson (1991), p. 448, also notes that Isaiah 6:10 "probably underlies Romans 11:7-25."

<sup>7</sup> Klink (2016), p. 560; Morris (1995), p. 537.

<sup>8</sup> Elowsky (2007), p. 73, quotes Augustine, "For God thus blinds and hardens, simply by letting alone and withdrawing his aid. And God can do this by a judgment that is hidden, although not by one that is unrighteous. This is a doctrine that the piety of the God-fearing ought to preserve unshaken and inviolable in all its integrity: even as the apostle, when treating of the same intricate question, says, "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid." [Rom. 9:14] If, then, we must be far from thinking that there is unrighteousness with God, this only can it be, that, when he gives his aid, he acts mercifully. And when he withholds it, he acts righteously. For in all he does, he does not act rashly but in accordance with judgment."

<sup>9</sup> See Carson (1991), p. 448-449, for an excellent breakdown of this issue where he presents four considerations for those who want to believe that God's sovereignty is "harsh, manipulative, even robotic...."

accept either determinism or indeterminism. But, scripturally speaking, choice is not an illusion, nor does it exist within a vacuum. Wherever we land, we mustn't deny that God is in control and man is responsible for his actions. And in light of that, this means that we have a great responsibility to respond when God calls; otherwise, we may not get another chance. "We must never forget it is by God's appointment that if His word does not quicken, it must deaden."<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, this has happened many times throughout history. For instance, in the Exodus account, Pharaoh, like the Israelites, refused to capitulate to God, though there were clear signs (i.e., plagues) that God was, indeed, at work. Consequently, the pagan king's refusal to listen to the testimony of such miraculous works like the Nile turning to blood, frogs/flies being loosed on the land, livestock dying, and hail falling from the sky further solidified Pharaoh's pride and unbelief. Remarkably, a careful reading of that account shows that the first hand to harden the King's heart was his *own* (cf. Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34).<sup>11</sup> Eventually, however, Moses revealed that God himself was the one who took up that hardening (cf. Ex. 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10). What are we to make that?

God is longsuffering, patient, and, yes, slow to anger, but just as he is unwilling that any should perish (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8-10; Ezek. 18:32), the Lord is also unwilling to leave the guilty unpunished (cf. Nah. 1:3). As Dawn Wilson once wrote, "God's patience is lengthy, but it is not endless."<sup>12</sup> The Jews in Jesus' day, like Pharaoh, crossed a point of no return. For over three years, Jesus provided sign after sign, yet still, the Israelites persisted in their unbelief. And so, they earned a further hardening by God's hand due to their lack of faith. God clouds the heart in response to willful transgression.<sup>13</sup> The Lord would rather use our faith, but should we give him only our faithlessness, he will use that too. "Even the fact of unbelief is not beyond the power and even purpose of God."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Morris (1995), p. 536, quoting J.O.F. Murray, *Jesus according to S. John* (London, 1936).

<sup>11</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 216, provides a helpful discussion of the apparent "naked predestinarianism" and how, though it may seem like John is proposing an "irresistible reprobation," it is clear from other passages in scripture, including both the Exodus story and Deut. 29:2-4, that this was not John's intent nor "would it have been so understood" by John's initial readership. Beasley-Murray concludes, "The guilt of the people in their repudiation of the ministry of Jesus matched the predestination of God, their rejection of his message matched the concealment of the secret of the kingdom, the judgment on their blindness entailed the divine rejection of the rejectors."

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, Dawn, "Scripture Reminds Us That God Is Patient—until He Isn't," August 10, 2022, *Bible Study Tools*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/scripture-reminds-us-that-god-is-patient-until-he-isnt.html>, [accessed, April 5, 2023].

<sup>13</sup> Keener (2012), 2:884.

<sup>14</sup> Morris (1995), p. 535.

John concludes his exposition of Isaiah's writings by saying, "These things said Esaias, when he saw his glory, and spake of him." One would be tempted to think that the apostle means that Isaiah saw some pre-incarnate form of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> And, indeed, that might be the case. However, against this understanding, it should be noted that John doesn't say that Isaiah saw "Christ" but "his glory."<sup>16</sup> In the immediate context, the personal pronoun does refer to the person Jesus Christ. However, it is Jesus' *glory* that is being emphasized, not some Christophany. And, in the context of both this chapter and the rest of John's account, Christ's glory always referred to his suffering on the cross.<sup>17</sup> Thus, John was saying that the messianic passages in Isaiah spoke, specifically, about how the glorification of the Messiah would be his sacrificial death.<sup>18</sup> And no passage better illustrates this point than Isaiah 52-53.

Isaiah spoke about the "servant" who will act "prudently." He will be "exalted and extolled, and be very high" (cf. 52:13). But (in what would've been a shocking turn of events for Isaiah's initial readership) this same unnamed servant would, ultimately, be led "as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isa. 53:7) and would be "numbered with the transgressors" and he would end up bearing "the sin of many," making "intercession for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). All true Israelites, from Abraham (cf. 8:56, 58) to Isaiah and beyond, saw and recognized that the Messiah was like Jesus, even in his death. Though it might've been a big pill to swallow at the time, when one examines both the testimony of the O.T. in light of Jesus' words and work, there is more than enough evidence to convince an honest examiner that the messianic king was, indeed, destined to die. As Keener concludes, "Jesus' death is the ultimate theophany."<sup>19</sup>

**Vs. 42-43** – Before closing with yet another appeal to believe, John wanted to ensure that, while the majority did not believe in Jesus, some did. He says, "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." Who were these "chief rulers" who "believed" on Jesus? Nicodemus? Joseph of Arimathea? It is possible, as John references those two individuals in the context of Jesus' burial (cf. 19:38-39). As we'll discuss later, their actions publicly identified themselves with Jesus' cause and community, not to mention Nicodemus' defense of Jesus during the Lord's trial (cf. 7:50-52).<sup>20</sup> However, two people could hardly be considered "many." Apparently,

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<sup>15</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 391.

<sup>17</sup> Morris (1995), p. 538.

<sup>18</sup> Carson (1991), p. 450.

<sup>19</sup> Keener (2012), 2:885.

<sup>20</sup> Carson (1991), p. 451.

according to John, more than a few saw Jesus for who he was.<sup>21</sup> And “if “many” of the rulers believed, one may be sure that many more of the ordinary people did also.”<sup>22</sup>

But lest we think too highly of them, the apostle quickly points out that though they were believers, they refused to confess Jesus openly. Why? Because they did not want to be "put out of the synagogue." Unlike the man healed of his blindness in Ch. 9, these secret believers "loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." Coming out and revealing their belief in Jesus would've proven detrimental to their lifestyle and standing within the Jewish community. That was a price they were not willing to pay.

Interestingly, "praise" here is the Greek term **δόξα** (doxa), the same word translated as “glory” in verse 41.<sup>23</sup> Doubtless, John intends his readers to compare what Isaiah saw/spoke about and what these so-called "believers" valued. They did not love the glory of God revealed through his Son. They loved the admiration of their peers more. This is not to belittle the sacrifice of proclaiming one's faith in hostile community. In a society based around the synagogue and the Jewish faith, to be excommunicated is not to be disparaged. "The fear of the leaders who believed in Jesus was very real."<sup>24</sup> But even a legitimate fear is not a sufficient excuse to conceal one's faith (cf. Mat. 10:33). How many people haven't shared their faith throughout the years simply because they were afraid of what someone else might think? John does not look too kindly on such people.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 392, “Even at this advanced stage of the plot against Jesus, opposition toward him was by no means monolithic.”

<sup>22</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 217.

<sup>23</sup> Morris (1995), p. 538; Köstenberger (2008), p. 392, points this out in the footnotes.

<sup>24</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 317.

<sup>25</sup> Keener (2012), 2:886, “These who loved human honor more than God’s honor acted from fear rather than from courage (cf. 3:2); this behavior merited only shame, not honor, before the one who know all hearts (2:23-25).”

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 37

Text: John 12:37-43

Last week, we unpacked Jesus' final public discourse. And with Jesus' closing remarks, so too comes to the close of his public ministry and a close to the first half of John's account.<sup>26</sup> But, before the story continues and we're given a peek into the Lord's last few moments with his disciples, our faithful narrator mounts the stage and begins to address his audience. And he does so to answer a question that not only bothered many in his day but many others throughout history, and still many more today: "Why didn't the masses believe in Jesus?"

Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

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<sup>26</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 389.