

## **“Unbelief”**

John 12:36b-43

*<sup>36b</sup>When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. <sup>37</sup>Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, <sup>38</sup>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?” <sup>39</sup>Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, <sup>40</sup>“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.” <sup>41</sup>Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. <sup>42</sup>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; <sup>43</sup>for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. (ESV)*

A boy after the first service came up and said, “You should write a book about all your Army adventures.” I told one this morning. It’s twenty years ago now (I hate to say that), but twenty years ago when I was in the Ranger battalion we traveled all over the world. In a Ranger battalion (I’m sure it’s the same way in other units), really you are only ever doing one of two things. You’re either doing something that is mission-oriented and mission-critical, or you’re pulling pranks on your fellow Rangers. You have to keep sane and one of the ways people keep sane is by seeing if they can out-prank the next guy. One of the ones that I’ll never forget was pulled on me by my roommate, a guy named Ray Gutierrez. He was Mexican-American and had a master’s degree in astronomy before he ever entered the Army. He was an interesting guy, but because of his genius (much like Wile E. Coyote) he was able to pull some better pranks. Once we were lying all day and all night in an ambush line somewhere in Central America in the jungle. If you’ve ever been in the jungle, it’s dark. It’s darker than dark because there’s no ambient light. It’s like being in a dark room with the door shut – no light. We were lying there and at some point we got called in and were told the training was over and it was time to come back into our rally point. Right before we got up, Gutierrez said [whispering], “Hey, Allen!” “What?” [louder] “Allen!” “What?” “Look over here.” What he had done was taken the red lens off his flashlight and had it pointing right at my eyes (we were lying next to each other). As soon as I looked over he turned the light on and said, “Hey, does that hurt your night vision?” I was blind. I literally was blind. He said, “Come on, we have to go back. But I had to hold onto him going back.

Maybe something closer to home: I was driving to church this morning. I wonder about this all the time. Whoever planned the roads in western Washington, why did they plan things east and west and north and south? Why not a little bit northwest and southwest? I turned onto 212<sup>th</sup> to come to church at 7:30 this morning and as soon as I crested over the hill this huge sun was there – this huge orb that literally blinded me. I slapped down the visor of my truck. I had my hand out the window like Braille driving to try and see where I was going and just hoped that the person in front of me was doing the right thing because all I was looking at was their taillights.

What’s my point to all that? The point is just that the Bible talks a lot about light. The Gospel of John particularly talks a lot about light and Jesus being the light that dispels darkness. But light does more than just dispel darkness. Light can also make you blind. So, it’s a little bit more complicated than light dispels darkness and everything is okay. Light, taken from the wrong perspective can actually make things worse. That’s sort of what we’re going to talk about this morning.

The text that I read to you this morning is really John’s epilogue on the ministry of Jesus - at least the public ministry of Jesus. He’s not grappling with it so much; he assumes that we’re going to grapple with it, so he gives an explanation for something. The explanation he’s giving is an explanation for the unbelief of Israel. Jesus came to Israel as their Messiah and they, in large part, did not embrace Him. I imagine John was thinking, “People are going to want to know why they didn’t embrace Jesus. That’s going to be an important thing to talk about as I write this Gospel.” So the public ministry of Jesus finishes. Remember the last thing that Jesus said? It’s the verse right before. He said, “Believe in the light while you have the light.” This morning we’re going to look at just two things. We’re going to look at the basis for unbelief on one hand. On the other hand we’re going to look at the hope of grace.

What's the basis of unbelief? John sort of explains to us when you ask the question, "Why when Jesus came did most people not embrace him?" Josh McDowell wrote a couple books, I think in the late 70s or early 80s called "Evidence Demands a Verdict." They're absolutely wonderful books if you already believe. If you don't believe yet, they don't necessarily demand a verdict. The question is, "Why?" What's the basis for unbelief?

Notice at the end of verse 36 is says:

<sup>36b</sup> *When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. (ESV)*

Then John says:

<sup>37</sup> *Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, <sup>38</sup> 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?" (ESV)*

The first thing John says (almost incredulously) is though he did so many signs before them, still they did not believe. Is that surprising to you? It should be in a way, depending on your theological perspective. How could Jesus just do things in front of people and they not embrace Him? That sort of drives me crazy when I read this. How could they not do it? The key to understanding it is the passage from Isaiah that John quotes, which I think is really the outline for the whole Gospel of John up to this point. John says, "Though he did so many signs, still they did not believe him." Then he says, "So that (or consequently) the words of Isaiah were fulfilled." "Lord who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord revealed?" [Isaiah 53:1] John is saying, "Part of the reason they didn't believe is that it fulfills what God said would happen." What does he mean by that? Let's think about what they did not believe. The passage from Isaiah basically has to do with two things: it has to do with words and it has to do with deeds. On one hand Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" In other words, "the message that we gave them." On the other hand, "To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" In other words "the arm of the Lord being revealed" has to do with signs or deeds.

John's whole Gospel up to this point revolves around seven signs and seven deeds. Seven words and seven deeds from Jesus that people saw. John's Gospel is arranged around that. If you work your way through the Gospel of John you hear Jesus saying, "I am" at least seven times. He says it a lot more, but there are seven what we call "I am" statements. This is all spoken to Israel. Jesus feeds 5,000; Israel comes and says, "Give us some more of that bread" and what does Jesus say to them? He says, "I am the bread of life." He shows up at the festival of lights and stands up like a crazy person and says, "You guys want light? You want glory? I am the light of the world." God always promised that He would be Israel's shepherd. What does Jesus say after He says, "I am the light of the world"? He says, "I am the gate for the sheep. You want to enter into God's sheep fold, you have to come through Me." Who's the shepherd? Funny you ask. That's the next "I am" statement. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus said. "Not only am I the good shepherd – the one who will save you, but the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." Worried about death? Remember what he said to Martha, "What do you think is going to happen with your brother?" "I know he'll rise again from the dead." What does He say to her? "I am the resurrection." How do we get to where you're going, Jesus? "I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life." In the Old Testament God spoke of Israel over and over again as His vine and Jesus says in John 15, "I am the true vine." Then He goes on to say, "I am the vine and you are the branches." So, seven different things John records when he talks about the words of Jesus.

John's Gospel also revolves around seven different signs - "The arm of the Lord being revealed." What are those signs? The first one was the wedding at Cana when Jesus turned water into wine. That's one of my favorite passages where He tells his mother, "Woman." "Woman. Now is not my time." He turns water into wine. Shortly after that He heals a nobleman's son. After healing a nobleman's son, He heals a man at the pool called Bethesda. Remember the guy had been lying there for 38 years and John makes it clear that everyone knew who he was. Jesus heals this man. Shortly after healing the man, Jesus feeds 5,000 people. Everyone sees it. After He feeds 5,000 people, Jesus walks on water. After Jesus walks on water the next big event we see is the man who is blind from birth. Everyone knew the man was blind from birth – there's no question. Jesus gives him his sight. Finally, the last big sign before we get here is the raising of Lazarus. That was so public and so obvious it said, "The whole world was going after him because of it." The Jewish leadership wanted to kill not

only Jesus but also Lazarus. So, that was all there. John writes his whole Gospel around these two themes. What is the response to it? Israel didn't believe. How could you not? But they didn't. Ultimately not because they couldn't, but because they didn't. Ultimately they couldn't, is what John says here. They failed to believe this. When you look at Isaiah chapter 6 when Isaiah is called into His ministry it's eye opening, at least to a preacher, because in Isaiah chapter 6 Isaiah has this grand vision of God's throne and the angels around shouting, "Holy, Holy, Holy." God says, "Who will go preach for me?" and Isaiah (very naively, I think) says, "Here am I. Choose me." And God says, "You're the man." Here's what God says that Isaiah's ministry will be like. I can empathize at some level.

<sup>8</sup> . . . Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."<sup>9</sup> And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'<sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

"You're going to have a great ministry, Isaiah. The more you preach it the harder they're going to get. Isn't that cool?" It's not. Trust me.

I've been reading through a book called, "The Christian Ministry" by Charles Bridges in the nineteenth century. He said something that really opened my eyes awhile back, and it's actually comforted me some. He said that when the Gospel is being preached it only ever does one of two things. The Gospel of Jesus either softens people's hearts or the Gospel of Jesus hardens people's hearts. It's never neutral because you and I are never neutral. So it's always either drawing people closer or it's driving people away. It's helpful to understand that, because when God says to Isaiah, "Keep preaching so that they might be ever hearing but never understanding, ever seeing but never seeing, being blind" basically God is saying, "I'm going to accomplish my purposes through their unbelief, not cause their unbelief." This text doesn't say that God caused people's unbelief, that God made it so that people could not believe. But at least at the beginning they're unbelieving and that's what God said would happen in Isaiah. The up-side of their unbelief (by the way) is that God used it to accomplish the crucifixion of Jesus. Through their unbelief, God accomplished His purpose of having His Son give His life as a ransom for many. They didn't believe, but there's a bigger consequence to their unbelief. They didn't believe, and because they didn't believe, ultimately they couldn't believe. That's what this text says. Notice:

<sup>38</sup> . . . "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

<sup>39</sup> Therefore they could not believe. . . (ESV)

They didn't believe, and because they didn't believe, they couldn't believe, ultimately. What are we to make of that? I think one thing that's helpful to me as I thought through this was "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Have you ever read that? Everyone sort of knows the story, generally speaking. It's pretty common, culturally. By the way I don't feel bad about telling you the end because it's 150 years old. You should have read it by now. The story is about an upstanding, moral Victorian doctor named Jekyll. He decides he's going to experiment with seeing his darker side. So, he makes a potion that transforms him into Mr. Hyde. The potion doesn't just release his inhibitions so that he can do things that he normally wouldn't do, but it literally transfigures his body to match the evil part of him – the evil in him that wants to be immoral, that wants to do bad things. Most literary critics will say that the whole theme of this novel is to show that humans have both good and evil in them. There is some truth to that. But I think most of them miss the point. What's more interesting to me when you read through "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" is that each time Dr. Jekyll gives himself the potion it's harder for him to come back. He gives himself this potion to release his evil side and every time he releases his evil side it's harder for his evil side to come back. In fact as the book progresses it gets to a point where he doesn't even need the potion to transform into Mr. Hyde and at some point it gets to the point where he transforms into Mr. Hyde and can't come back. He's given himself over slowly and more and more and more to the evil that is within him and it gets to the point where he has gone so far he can't come back. That's what's going on here in the text – that's Israel's belief over the course of a thousand years, and even in the ministry of Jesus-that unbelief leads to unbelief leads to unbelief leads to unbelief until eventually you get to the point where you're beyond help. You get to the point where you can't believe. Why does that happen? It says because God blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts.

Does that mean that God proactively blinds people and hardens people? The answer is, "Absolutely not." Biblical scholars and theologians call this kind of language, "God's judicial hardening." Judicial hardening. All it takes for God to harden someone's heart is not pro-activity, it's inactivity. God does not have to proactively make people hard. When you read the story of Pharaoh and the story of Israel, what it means for God to make someone's heart hard is not to proactively come upon them and say, "Bam, you're hard now. I turned you into a rock." No. The way that God makes people hard is by withdrawing. Those of you who fight for man's free will, here's a great example. You want to unbelieve, you want to flee from God – God pulls His hands back and you just become harder and harder and harder. We don't start out neutrally. We're not like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde – part good and part bad. We start out bad, frankly. The Bible says we're conceived in sin – we're conceived in iniquity. All it takes for God to harden someone's heart is to pull back, not to push Himself upon. Remember the book of Romans? The way God punishes sin there? It says, "He gave them over." He didn't have to do anything but let them do what they wanted to do. Your own heart's natural inclination is to run from God. Your heart's natural inclination is to be Mr. Hyde. All of us fight – some do it the right way, some do it the wrong way. We're all fighting to be Dr. Jekyll – at least we want people to see Dr. Jekyll even if our hearts are Mr. Hyde.

The basis of unbelief on one hand is that it resides within us naturally. If you persist in your unbelief you risk God turning you over. It's the same with any sin by the way. Even if you're a Christian, we push the line on some sins and you always are at risk for God to say at least for a time, "You want to play with that fire? Go ahead." What's the hope of grace? The hope of grace lies in what sounds like judicial language here. Let me read to you from Isaiah 6 (it's actually a paraphrase) when John says:

*<sup>39</sup> Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, <sup>40</sup> "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." (ESV)*

What's the hope of grace? What's the hope of the Gospel? The way God hardens is that He pulls back. Well, the hope of the Gospel is that the way God softens is that He initiates. The way God softens is that He is proactive. What does the first line say there? It says, "He has blinded their eyes." How does someone see? Remember the story of Jesus and Nicodemus? Remember John chapter 3 when Nicodemus goes to seek Jesus out and he's sort of making small talk, and Jesus just interrupts him and says, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless you're born again (or born from above) you cannot see the kingdom of God." Unless you're born from above, unless you're born again, you can't see the kingdom of God. Unless God comes and opens your eyes, unless God comes upon you by His spirit and proactively gives you eyes to see you'll never see it. The next thing it says here, "He hardened their hearts." What's the problem if you've got a hard heart? You need God to intervene. Let me read to you what God promised Israel in Ezekiel chapter 36. God promises Israel and ultimately us:

*<sup>24</sup> I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (ESV)*

So what is the hope of grace? The hope of grace is that God would give you eyes to see, but the hope of grace is also that God would take your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. Now, if He's given you eyes to see and a heart to believe, what do you need to do? It's right there in the text. Turn. Turn. Turn from your sin - That's what the Bible calls repentance - and turn unto Him. Come home. If God has given you eyes to see and a heart to understand and believe, don't just sit there. Trust Him. Pursue Him. When you look at the cross, do you see what Jesus has done for you? If you have, then leave your sin behind and go after the One Who has taken away all of your sin because God gives a promise to those who would turn. Did you read what that is? He says, "Turn, then I will heal them." Do you want to be healed from your sins? Flee to Jesus. Do you want to be healed from all the arrows and hurts and things that you've accumulated over the course of your lifetime? There's only one place. If you have eyes to see and a heart to believe, go to Jesus and give them to Him. Otherwise you end up carrying them around your whole life. The burden just gets heavier and heavier. Basically you have a choice.

You can either flee to Jesus and give him all of your stuff or you can be like Robert De Niro in the movie, "The Mission." Rodrigo Mendoza is basically a slave trader with the Guarani Indians. There's also Father Gabriel who started a mission among the Guarani Indians. At some point Robert De Niro, the slave trader, besides having traded slaves he kills his brother and is just broken (you think) and he goes to Father Gabriel and says, "Give me penance. Give me something to do to take away my sins." The Father tells him to take all of his armor, all of his stuff. He puts it in a satchel and ties it to himself and he has to go up and down this waterfall. At some point the priest offers to help him and they cut the stuff away, but he will not give it up. He's being offered help. He's being offered grace and instead of letting it be cut away and fall away he goes back and actually grabs it. He wants to carry it. Eventually there's a good part. He eventually drops and they have to help him. But the point is, "Are you going to let Jesus take your burdens? Are you going to let him take all your stuff or are you going to carry it?" If you're a Christian you supposedly believe that He's taken it all and yet you keep going back and picking it up and grabbing it. That's unbelievably the way. It's just as guilty a sin as anything else. Think about that.