

# John 12:37-50

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well great, we're back in our long series and time in John's Gospel and we come really to a critical part of the Gospel.

We come to a moment of retrospection really, it's a bit like an interval in a movie or in a show, halfway through, John looks back and gives us a summary of the story so far.

Now, before we get into the final moments of Jesus' life, so the foot washing and the upper room discourse and the passion narrative, this is one last look at what has happened until now in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

And John tells us here that the story has not worked out how it should have worked out. This great story of reunion, of a God who comes down to earth and who knocks on the door of his people to be with them and to bless them forever, but it hasn't worked out like that.

He comes to his own people, but they've slammed the door in his face. And we've got a very, very sad summary of how things have worked out between God and his people, the Jews, the Israelites.

[ 1 : 24 ] And we've been looking at what it means to believe in Jesus Christ. And we see in the story of the Jews a snapshot of the tragedy of unbelief.

John tells us two things here in this sad conclusion to the story. John tells us, firstly, they did not believe. They did not believe. Look at verse 37 at the top.

He says, though Jesus had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe. In this great story of union between God and his people, their response does not fit.

It isn't right. They did not believe. This is the conclusion near the end of the story. It's the conclusion that the negative attitude that we've kind of seen from the religious leaders and the Jews throughout the gospel is consistent and it's basic to them.

Just as John starts in chapter 1, Jesus came to his own, but his own people did not receive him. They did not believe. And John is clear that that unbelief was not Jesus' fault.

[ 2 : 41 ] See what he says. Even though they had seen many signs, they still did not believe. As if to say that they'd been given plenty of evidence, plenty of proof, but they still didn't.

It wasn't that Jesus made less of an effort with these people, the Jews. Or he was a bit nasty to them, or he was off with them. Or they weren't around when he did the signs that showed who he was.

Actually, the gospels tell us that Jesus came first to the house of Israel, to his own people. They were top of the list, if anything. But they did not believe.

And they should have believed. They'd seen water being turned into wine. They'd seen Jesus feed thousands with a few bits of bread and fish.

They'd seen him raise a dead man. But they did not believe. And as John reflects on this unbelief, he wants us, as the reader, to feel sad about that.

[ 3 : 46 ] To feel the senselessness of that unbelief. To feel how strange it is. It is like a fairy story, isn't it? When the prince rides on a horse to rescue his bride.

And he comes to find her and to seek her out so that she can be with him in his palace forever. And on the last page, instead of happily ever after, she files for a divorce.

It's not how it should have been. John shows us that this is the tragic conclusion to a long-awaited relationship. A relationship that has been through ups and downs.

He quotes from Isaiah, doesn't he, there, in verse 38. As if to say, this has been the problem and this has been the issue all along. All through the story of the Bible.

God's people are doing again what they've done before. And he quotes Isaiah. Let me paraphrase. He says that hardly anyone has believed what God had said.

[ 4 : 52 ] And proved by his almighty power, by his arm. Even though God has shown himself. And proved himself in powerful ways. They don't believe.

And it's a little snapshot of the tragedy. And the senselessness of unbelief. There is nothing more tragic, is there, than a happy story that ends with a It shouldn't have been like this.

With a nasty twist. That ends with a could have been. Or a should have been. And we've got to feel sad about this response. But in this snapshot of the Jews, John cleverly shows us here a portrait of ourselves.

He shows us as he pictures them where I am heading and where you are heading. Unless God intervenes. That God can give me all the evidence that I ask for.

For his existence. But the truth is, I still wouldn't believe. If it was up to me. He could give me sign after sign after sign of his love. And his care.

[ 6 : 05 ] And my need for him. And I would still slam the door in his face. He could come in the flesh. To mend a broken relationship. But I'd still turn him away.

And my life would end with a could have been. Or with a should have been. It's the tragedy of my unbelief. John here. He is like the ghost of Christmas future.

And he says, this is what we are like. They did not believe. Those words should fall off the page like a lead balloon. Because the whole project of the Bible story has been for God to win these people. Isn't it? The Jews. For God to be with them. God speaks to them. The Israelites. He comes near to them in the wilderness. He gives them kings and prophets.

He calls them back. Time and time and again. And finally he comes to them. To his own people in the Lord Jesus. And so this people particularly.

[ 7 : 10 ] They've been primed. And they've been prepped. They've been softened through exile. And still they don't believe. And so if the story was written with them in mind.

We think, well, what hope do we have? Of making the fairy tale ending. It's a sobering picture of them. Sobering because it shows a portrait of me and of you.

And of your friends and of your neighbours. Of the basic response to Jesus. Of unbelief. Unless God intervenes. So they did not believe.

Secondly though, John tells us they could not believe. Look at verse 39. Therefore they could not believe. For again, Isaiah said.

He has blinded their eyes. And hardened their hearts. Lest they see with their eyes. And understand with their hearts. And turn and I would heal them. And we want to ask really, don't we.

[ 8 : 13 ] As it comes to this part of the gospel. Why has the story ended in this way for the Jews? Why don't they believe? And it turns out that the problem is a little bit more complex than first meets the eye.

It is more complex than a simple choice of free will. Because not only is there an unwillingness to believe in Jesus. There is an inability to believe.

And shockingly, John tells us it is God himself who has caused that inability. Now this needs several weeks to get our heads around this.

But what is clear here is this unbelief is not a choice of free will. It is not a choice where people have the liberty of indifference.

As if people are indifferent to the gospel and to Jesus Christ. And can choose with unbiased preference whether to believe or not.

[ 9 : 20 ] Why couldn't they believe? It wasn't because they picked the wrong side of a 50-50 decision. Believe or not to believe, that's the question. It wasn't that they flicked a coin of belief and it landed the wrong side up.

It was, John tells us, because they were moved in that direction of unbelief by God himself. Who blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts.

God kept them from being able to believe. And so they had hard hearts and blind eyes when he came to them in Jesus.

And soberingly, that is true for many, many people. So that even though people have plenty of evidence, they cannot see it.

They just cannot. And even though God speaks to people in creation and in his words. And he shows himself to them.

[ 10 : 24 ] People's hearts are hard and they cannot feel him. They just cannot. And the big question is then, how can people who do this be blamed for not believing in God when he has caused that

unbelief?

When God made them unable to believe? I think this is where we need to bring in other parts of the Bible. What we see is here that God's hardening and blinding of these people is not some random arbitrary thing like picking names out of a hat and you just happen to be the unlucky ones.

But actually it is a confirmation and a giving over to what these people want deep down. It is not a blinding of people who really otherwise wanted to see.

And God has unfairly put this upon them. But it is a giving over to a mind and heart that is decidedly against God already. So when God blinded and hardened these people, it was a punishment.

It was a punishment on people who were refusing to use their eyes and soften their hearts. And so whilst they can't believe, they willingly can't.

[11:50] Do you see? In a sense, God merely gives these people what they ask for and what they most deeply desire. The most terrifying response God can give for anyone who rejects Jesus is to confirm a person in that rejection of him and to push that boat further down the river.

So that a person continually rushes with the current of their own hatred of God more and more and more away from him. That's what Paul says in Romans chapter 1, isn't it?

That God's anger, his wrath, is revealed when he does this. When he gives people over to their desire to reject him.

And so blindness and hardness of heart and unbelief, if I'm doing it, it is always my fault. Not God's. It is an inability to believe, but it's a guilty inability.

It is a willing inability. I'm unable to believe. God hardens a heart, but only because I'm not willing to be able. And there is a sense here that if there was a willingness and a humility and a humbling before God, and God wanted to heal them.

[13:12] Hear how he says in Isaiah that they might hear and understand and sing and I would heal them. I'm not reluctant to do that. I don't delight in the death of the wicked, he says in Ezekiel, in hardening these people.

But this is the tragedy of unbelief. They can't believe because they can't believe. And they won't believe because they can't.

They didn't believe. They couldn't believe. So that's them. What about us? The ghost of Christmas future in them shows us a little picture of ourselves.

And, sorry, it's a bit heavy, isn't it, this week? Pretty heavy, all of this. But it's a picture of people who are so unwilling to receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour, they subject themselves to a condition that is irretrievable unless God intervenes.

That no matter how many signs God sends them, and how many sermons God lets them hear, and how many lunchtime talks God lets them go to, and how many questions God lets them ask, they are led down by God, down the river of their own rejection of Jesus Christ.

[14:28] And John, the master evangelist, then, has us on the ropes, doesn't he? He wants us to feel sad about this.

And he wants us to feel fearful about this. And to ask for ourselves the what should have been and the what could have been. You know, they call him the evangelist, don't they, out of the gospel writers.

And don't forget John's agenda. What does he say at the end of his gospel? I'm writing these things so that you may believe. And that includes John 12.

John's intention here is that when we hear about their hardening, that we are softened. That we are not hardened like this. Like the Jews were then.

That we would not end up in the same situation that they did at the end of the story. And so he's got to get us to the point of desperation. And he does that.

[15:33] And if you look at verse 42. And this is typical of John. Because he kind of gives a little positive note, doesn't he? There's a big nevertheless in verse 42.

Nevertheless, and we're thinking finally, a breath of fresh air. Many of the authorities did believe in him. You're thinking finally there's some hope. But, he says, for fear of the Pharisees, they didn't confess it.

So they wouldn't be thrown out of the synagogue. They love the glory of man rather than the glory that comes from God. They won't and they can't. And John doesn't let up here. Because he wants us to see just how difficult and how remarkable true belief in Jesus actually is.

When it does happen. Even when people do believe, it's a signature move of John, isn't it? That many forms of belief are flawed counterfeits.

Because you cannot just flick a coin. You cannot just choose to believe. If you could, they of all people would have done. And since they don't, how can anyone?

[16:42] And that is the point here. John says, before I get into the last portion of Jesus' ministry, the conclusion is, Jesus came and we are unable and unwilling to receive him.

Unless God intervenes. You will not and you cannot believe. Belief cannot come from your ordinary faculties.

From stuff you can do. Do you remember what he said in chapter 1? We are born not of blood. Not of the will of the flesh. Nor of the will of man. But of God.

We need to be born from above. God must intervene. And this is where Jesus is heading. In the next section, which we'll look at next week.

As he begins to speak about himself. As witness, as the one from the Father. As the one from above. Because God must intervene.

[17:41] As we finish. It is a tragic conclusion to this part of the story. It is a sad end. And it is very sobering.

Because they of all people did not believe. And they could not believe. One writer comments on this passage. He says, The dark things in the Bible.

Are spoken for the sake of light. The ugly things are spoken for the sake of beauty. The painful things are spoken for the sake of comfort. And the sorrowful for the sake of joy.

And we're not beating around the bush here, are we? This is a really difficult subject. Of God hardening people. But the hardening is spoken for the sake of your softening.

And the blindness is spoken of for the sake of your seeing. That you might call out to him. And realise that you need more than anything his intervention.

[18:44] And to say to God. I do not want my story to end in the same way. With a should have been. Or with a could have been. And the only way that is going to happen.

Is if God intervenes. And so we need to lose all hope in ourselves. All hope. And to cry out for him. To him for help.

And when we do that. When we realise our need. And to come to him humbled. And for help alone. Even then.

To do that. We begin to believe, don't we? In the way that God wants us to. And as we do that. He promises that then.

We will see with our own eyes. And we will understand with our hearts. And he would turn. And he would heal us. And so let us do that now.

[19:38] As we close in a prayer. Let us pray.