

Belief in Jesus ■ Its Barriers and Blessings

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the profound themes of God's sovereignty over belief and unbelief, the root of unbelief pointing to the glory of Jesus Christ, and the ultimate purpose of Jesus' rejection leading to the cross for the salvation of the world. It emphasizes the divine orchestration behind Israel's unbelief, the significance of loving the glory of God over man, and the redemptive plan fulfilled through Jesus' rejection and sacrificial death.

Scripture: John 12:37, Isaiah 53:1, Isaiah 6:10, Hebrews 1:3, John 3:18, John 5:44

Topics: "God's Sovereignty", "Redemption through Rejection"

Description

This sermon delves into the profound themes of God's sovereignty over belief and unbelief, the root of unbelief pointing to the glory of Jesus Christ, and the ultimate purpose of Jesus' rejection leading to the cross for the salvation of the world. It emphasizes the divine orchestration behind Israel's unbelief, the significance of loving the glory of God over man, and the redemptive plan fulfilled through Jesus' rejection and sacrificial death.

Transcript

Let's pray. Father, we tremble at the thought of your blinding and hardening work. And we are so thankful that Jesus didn't come into the world to judge the world, but that the world through him might be saved.

I don't want to be the instrument of anyone's hardening tonight. I don't want to be the aroma from death to death. I tremble at the prospect of consigning anyone to destruction through bringing them to the point of decisive unbelief through exposing them to the brightness of the glory which they hate.

So God, I'm asking that you would come, and by your power and in your mercy, because of Christ, open eyes instead of closing them, softening hearts instead of hardening them, awakening faith instead of confirming unbelief. These are weighty words, and we need your help to both understand them and to respond in meekness and humility and faith and obedience to them. So come, Holy Spirit, and give aid to me and to those who hear.

I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Today's text is John 12, 37 to 50.

And it has in it some of the saddest, most painful parts of the Gospel of John. And we're going to focus mainly on those painful and sad parts. Now here's a link to Christmas along those very lines.

Do you remember that when Jesus was still less than six weeks old, under 40 days according to the law, his parents took him to the temple to be consecrated as the firstborn. And there happened to be there an old, old man named Simeon. Simeon had prayed, and God had told him, you will see my Messiah before you die.

And so he looked upon the babe, and he knew that's exactly what he was seeing. And here's the last thing he said to Mary. Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and the rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed.

And a sword will pierce your own soul also, so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. In other words, it's not going to be all happy. The truth in many hearts will be revealed.

Jesus will be opposed. Many will rise because of him, and many will fall because of him. A sword will go through Mary's own heart.

Many will fall because of him. And that's what this text in John 12 is about. Now, make sure that you embrace, that you know and embrace this truth.

Jesus and John don't tell us sad things to leave us in sadness. Make sure you embrace that. They tell us sad things in the end to make us glad.

The dark things in the Bible are spoken for the sake of light. The ugly things in the Bible are spoken for the sake of beauty. The painful things in the Bible are spoken for the sake of comfort.

The sorrowful things in the Bible are spoken for the sake of joy. And conflict is pictured in the Bible for the sake of peace. We know this because what Jesus said in John 15, 11.

He said that he speaks his words so that our joy might be full. And many of those words were painful. We know this because John said the reason he wrote his gospel in chapter 20, verse 31, is that you might believe and have life.

And we know that many things in this gospel are painful. Aimed at life. So the painful words of Jesus are aimed at joy, and the painful stories of John are aimed at life.

So know that as you listen. Embrace that, expect that, look for that. Don't go into a dark hole.

The saddest part of this text is verses 37 to 43. It's about the unbelief of Israel and God's blinding sentence on them. We're going to come to that in a moment.

But first, look with me briefly at the last part of the text, namely verses 44 to 50. Now, to give weight to this, to feel what's going on here, remember this. The end of chapter 12, in other words, the end of our text, verse 50, is the end of the public ministry of Jesus forever on this planet.

Chapter 13, to the end of the book, is Jesus with the 12 or the 11, then on trial, then dying, then rising, then ascending. Feel the weight of this moment. These are the last things he has to say publicly to an audience in public.

Let it weigh on you. Think about that. Think, why would he choose to talk like this? Then it's over.

He goes to the Last Supper, and everything else in the Gospel of John, he says to his disciples by themselves, except for the trial and the execution. There's something strange about the way John sets up these closing verses, and I mean verses 44 to 50. Look back at chapter 12, verse 36.

We ended with it last week, and the last thing we said was, believe in the light, and you will become sons of light. Then in the middle of the verse, you with me? In the middle of verse 36, it says, when Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. I think there's more than geography going on there.

Now, we don't know where he went. We don't know how long he was gone. What we know is that John, the writer of the Gospel, does all the talking from verses 36 to 44.

This is not Jesus. This is John talking. Jesus is in hiding while he's talking about the blindness.

Then, in verse 44, with no description of any setting, we suddenly read, Jesus cried out. Where is he? Where did he come from? Where's he standing? Who's he talking to? He didn't reestablish any context. He had gone away.

He had hidden himself. Jesus cries out. Why did he set it up like that? I think it's simply because these are the summary words of his ministry.

They're not time-bound. They're not place-bound. They're not audience-bound.

They're meant to be a climactic statement of what he's been about for three years. And it's going to be over. Nothing more public to say.

No more temple encounters. No more miracles to be wrought. No more signs to be given except the one.

So, what did he say? Let's read those verses and listen to this amazing summary statement of his ministry. Verse 44. Jesus cried out and said, Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but him who sent me.

Whoever sees me, sees him who sent me. First to last. That's been one of the main points, hasn't it? If you've seen me, you've seen the Father.

If you have me, you have the Father. If you know me, you know the Father. If you deny me, the Son, you don't have the Father.

Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. What you do with Jesus today is not time-bound. You do with God.

The evidence of what you think of God and what you do with God is what you do with Jesus. If he's your God, God is your God. If he's not, he's not.

No matter what you say in your head or write or believe. If Jesus is not your God, God is not your God. What you do with Jesus is what you do with God.

That's the gospel of John. Verse 46. I have come into the world as light so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

This is the last public mention of Jesus being the light of the world. And it's been the mention from the beginning. Chapter 1, verse 5. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not, will not, cannot overcome it.

Everyone who receives Jesus passes out of darkness into everlasting light. Now, the last three verses of his ministry, the emphasis falls on his words. I'm going to read them and I'm going to try to underline them with my voice.

You follow in your text and listen as I try to show you how I feel the shift. The shift is off of light now onto the window to light. The words are the window.

Through which you see his light and through which you climb into fellowship with his light. So let's read verse 47 to 50. If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I don't judge him.

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.

For I have not spoken on my own authority but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment to say and to speak. And I know that this commandment is life. It's eternal life.

What I say, therefore I say as the Father has told me. We know Jesus. We know the Father and we are saved and have eternal life through the word of Jesus.

Surely his point here is don't ever, ever lose your grip on the value of my words. To whom shall we go? Peter said you have the words of life. Jesus said my word is life and spirit.

I mean I love Jesus above all things but oh next to Jesus, word of Jesus. Because it's the window. I don't know him any other way.

I don't have a video. I don't have a hotline to heaven. I have his word.

And he has been pleased to make it so divine, so infallible, so anointed and so powerful that it's the instrument that pierces my heart and opens me to the reality beyond the word which is what we live for, Christ. Amazing that at the end of his public ministry he would so emphasize his word. It is life.

It is eternal life. There's no other way to embrace Jesus than to embrace him by, through, in his word. Die for this book.

Live for this book. It's our life. And with that the public ministry of Jesus is over.

Feel the weight of it. For 2,000 years we have had exactly what we need, the word of Jesus. No accident.

He didn't stay on the planet in order to talk to each of you personally. He left his word to talk to each of you personally. It's the way he set it up.

We have exactly what we need. He's been so kind to us. In English, those of us who speak English, so kind to us.

And oh, how we should give ourselves that this get to everyone. Now, verse 37 to 43, the sad part of the text, which makes us glad. If I succeed and the Holy Spirit helps me.

Here's what I think is going on. As the public ministry of Jesus comes to an end, John feels constrained, the writer of the gospel, feels constrained under the inspiration of God, not only to sum up, verses 44 to 50, not only to sum up the positive ministry of Jesus, but also to give a summary account of why his ministry met with such failure. That is, he came to his own and his own did not receive him.

Why? He's so great. Sign after sign, though he has done so many signs. Verse 37, they didn't believe.

John feels, I must account for this. Is this an accident? Is this a historical fluke? Is this a detour? Is this a failure? Is this a plan? What is going on? The Messiah comes into the world and people to whom he came say no. Why? That's what's going on here.

Now remember Simeon, Luke 2.34, this child is appointed for the fall and the rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed. He is appointed to be opposed. Do you feel that? He is appointed by God to be opposed.

He came to his own, chapter 1, verse 11, and his own people did not receive him. So the ministry of Jesus begins with the announcement that he would be rejected and it ends with an explanation of that rejection. That's what's going on here.

The rejection is planned. With chapter 13, everything focuses on the final hours with his 12 and the death and the resurrection and what we are now to see is that this catastrophic and glorious end to the greatest life that ever was, was owing to the unbelief of Israel. The catastrophic, glorious end is owing to the unbelief of Israel.

Jesus was crucified because he came to his own and they did not receive him. And then remember this. This is no accident of history.

The reason Jesus came into the world was to be crucified. The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many, Jesus said. He came to die in the place of sinners 2,000 years later, sitting in a service in Minneapolis.

That's why he came, is to die so that you could live. And the means to that was the unbelief of Israel. The path that God planned for him, the path that would lead to the cross where he would give himself up as a substitution for sinners, was a path that led through the unbelief of Israel and make possible the salvation of the world.

So you can see where this is going. This sad text, this sad account of the unbelief of Israel is designed by John and designed by God to bring everlasting gladness to the world. Joy to the world is the point of the unbelief of Israel.

Joy to the world is the point of the unbelief of Israel. God's point, God's plan. So let me make a few observations from the text and then draw three conclusions.

So maybe three observations and three conclusions to try to lead us into the text. And I'll tell you, I found this very difficult and gloriously rewarding. This is so typical of the way I handle John or he handles me.

I usually meet the text flabbergasted. That's the way I usually start in John. I just flabbergasted at the way he puts things together.

I bang my head against my table like Luther, who wouldn't let Romans 1.16 go, and three, four, five hours later, lights everywhere. So I hope you see some of them. So let's start, and I'm going to read verses 37 to 40.

And here's my first observation, and I'm going to try to show it. The first observation is God planned for many in Israel to be unbelieving. And to reject Jesus.

God planned for many in Israel to be unbelieving and to reject Jesus. Now let me read you where I'm getting that. This is not a theological deduction.

This is an exegetical induction. That language means anything to you at all. I'm not trying to pull it down out of stuff I already believe.

I'm trying to pull it up out of words that you're going to read right now. You see if it's here. Because if it isn't, you shouldn't believe this.

Start at verse 37. Though He had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe on Him, so that... Now there's going to be four of these. There's my first indicator that this unbelief is planned.

So that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. Quoting Isaiah 53 now. Lord, who has believed what He heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore, that's my second indicator that this is planned.

Therefore, they could not believe. Wherefore? Because of the prophecy. For, that's my third indicator that He planned this.

For, again Isaiah said, He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest, there's my fourth indicator, lest, so that they see with their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their heart, and turn and I would heal them. I think it is crystal clear from those four indicators that God planned the unbelief of Israel 700 years or 7 billion years before. That's observation number one.

Observation number two. God's planning of the unbelief and blindness and hardness of Israel does not take away or contradict the personal responsibility of Israel or the guilt of Israel or the blameworthiness of this unbelief. How do we know that? Jesus said in John 3, 18.

John 3, verse 18. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. In other words, unbelief in Israel is worthy of condemnation.

This unbelief is guilty unbelief. They are responsible, accountable for the unbelief that they are full of against Jesus. Our unbelief tonight in this room, our unbelief Sunday morning, December 11, is guilty unbelief.

No excuse. So many signs, so many evidences, so much glory, so much light. Our hardness is a guilty.

Our blindness is a guilty, blameworthy blindness. Observation number three. John gives us a glimpse into how God does this blinding, hardening.

And the way he gives us a glimpse is by the way he quotes the prophet Isaiah twice. Now think of it this way. John, if he wanted to make this point, and he's an inspired apostle, he could have simply said, their

unbelief is owing to their hardness, and God willed their hardness, God planned their hardness, God brought blindness into their lives, and He's going to turn it for the salvation of the nations.

He didn't have to quote any Bible. Why did he? There's a lot going on here. Why did he quote? And why did he quote these two very different passages from Isaiah? Where would you have gone? Chapter 12, verse 38, he quotes Isaiah 53, verse 1. And in chapter 12, verse 40, he quotes Isaiah 6, verse 10.

So those are the two texts, 53, 1, 6, 10. And these are familiar chapters to us. 53, the suffering servant, he has borne our grief, carried our sorrows.

We know that text. I saw the Lord high and lifted up. The angel, seraphim, around him, holy, holy.

We know these two texts. Let's take them one at a time. Isaiah 53 is a description of the suffering servant.

The next two verses after verse 1 where he says, Who's going to believe this? Who will believe this? In other words, this isn't going to be met with belief. That's why he quotes that verse. This is not going to be met with belief.

What's not going to be met with belief? I'll read it to you. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected.

So the point is that Isaiah prophesied a suffering servant who would be rejected. He knew he would be rejected. God knew he would be rejected.

Israel wouldn't believe on this kind of Messiah. This is why he quotes verse 1. Who's going to believe this? Why won't they believe? Because he had no form, no majesty. They don't want that kind of Messiah.

That's not the stuff of Messiahhood. No form, no majesty, no beauty, despised, rejected. This is not the stuff of Messiah.

No, we won't have that. He knew that would be the case. And that's who he sent.

You see what's happening? He knew that's what would be the result. And that's the kind he sent. Now, verse 40.

John 12, 40. Here he's quoting Isaiah 6, 10, which describes what's going to happen when Isaiah preaches what he just saw. I saw the Lord sitting upon the throne.

High. This is very different, right? Very different from Isaiah 53. High and lifted up.

Above him stood the Seraphim. One called to the other, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.

Then he said to Isaiah, You go preach that and make this people's heart hard. Why would that make their heart hard? They don't want him. They know who they want to be centered, powerful.

They won't have that great, holy, sovereign, awesome, lifted up, magisterial God. Give me a God I can carve and control and make useful to me. Not one who so governs my life that I've got to bow at every moment to his authority and guide by his word.

No, no. We won't have that. So, what does Jesus claim? He claims to be that God.

He claims to have that glory. He claims that his words are the words of that God. His hands are the extension of that God.

His thoughts are the thoughts of that God. His holiness is the holiness of that God. His power is the power of that God.

And when he does, they want to kill him. And God knew that would be the result. And he sent that kind of Messiah for that kind of result.

In other words, the way God planned to blind and harden many in Israel was by sending a Messiah whom he knew they absolutely would not accept. It had already been written in Isaiah that they wouldn't. They didn't want his lowliness.

And they didn't want his pretensions to majesty and glory and deity. But that's what they got. And God planned it that way.

God knew what the effect would be. And thus, he blinded them by giving them what they absolutely needed and absolutely didn't want. Now, to confirm that we're in sync with John here, that's what I do to myself.

I say, okay, that looks really significant what I've just seen there in those two texts and the rejection. It all seems to be coming together. Is there any confirmation, any more that would help me discern on the right track here? Now, let's look at verses 42 to 43 for this amazing confirmation.

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 and the glory more than the glory that comes from God. Now, I don't know if this is authentic faith in verse 42.

I still don't know. I've got my doubts. We've seen inauthentic faith in this Gospel.

That's why I feel free to doubt this in view of verse 43 especially. Jesus said in John 5, 44, How can you believe who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from God? You can't believe in me if your heart is governed by love for the glory of man and not the glory of God. It's exactly what it says in verse 43.

So let's just say this carefully. Whether that faith in verse 42 is real faith, saving faith or not, the defect in it is in verse 43 and it kills faith at least sometimes. Chapter 5, verse 44.

Namely, they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. That's a defect at best and a destruction at worst of saving faith. The root of Israel's unbelief is that they loved the glory of man and they did not love the glory of God.

Or look at verse 41 and let's put all the pieces together now. We're almost finished putting the pieces together and we'll draw things to a close with three conclusions. Verse 41 is the last piece in the puzzle.

John is commenting on what he just read from Isaiah 53 and 6. Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory. He saw Jesus' glory. He spoke of Jesus.

Yes. Jesus is the suffering servant. Jesus is the brightness, the radiance of the glory of God in the first verses of Isaiah 6. And guess what? They don't love this glory.

When they saw a man in chapter 53, what kind of man did they see? Despised, without beauty, nobody going to... he's ugly. That's not a man. I want a man.

I want a glory of man. I want a big man. I want a strong man.

I want a powerful man. That's not my man. And then when the glory of God stood forth in all of its majesty in chapter 6, they don't love that.

They love man. Man is central. Man, praise me, man.

Be a great man. I'll follow a great man. I'm not going low.

I'm not going weak. I'm not going despised. I'm not going to a cross.

And you call me with that kind of glory? I don't love that. I think verse 43 is the key to unbelief in the gospel of John. Scary, isn't it? Because that's the way I am.

Too much, right? Loving the glory of man. Come on, Bethlehem, like me. Say nice things about me, please, because my ego really feeds on that.

This is scary stuff. That is incompatible with faith. They love the glory of man.

They don't love the glory of God. That's exactly the opposite of what it takes to believe. Therefore, they don't believe, and God knew they wouldn't believe, and he gave them exactly what would drive them into their hardness.

Now let me close with three conclusions. And remember, my goal is to see sad news as glad news. I'm not content without seeing good news in the Bible, because the whole Bible, the point is gospel.

I want good news here. Why are you telling me all this really hard stuff? So, conclusion number one. God is sovereign over all unbelief and all belief.

That's conclusion number one. God is sovereign over all belief and unbelief. That is, he knows exactly how to plan both in ways that exalt his sovereignty and preserve man's accountability.

He knows how to do that. And you don't need to understand how he does it. I just groped in there to get a little bit of light on how he was doing it.

That's not the end of the mystery. Believe me, it's not the end of the mystery. You don't need to know how he does it.

You need, if you're going to be a Bible believer, he's sovereign and you're responsible. Your unbelief is guilty, and he's in control of it. We love the Bible more than we love systems, which means he is never frustrated, never thwarted in his plans by anyone's unbelief.

And he is never prevented from saving his own by their vaunted free will. Ever. Number two.

Conclusion number two. The root of unbelief points to the glory of Jesus Christ. The root of unbelief points to the glory of Jesus Christ.

He is the radiance of God's glory, Hebrews 1.3. He is meek and lowly. So put those together. This is our Christ.

He is the very radiance of the glory of God. He is very God of very God. We sang tonight, begotten, not created.

I hope you feel the weight of the theology behind that. Everlastingly, eternally begotten. Never created.

He is our God. The radiance of the glory of the Father. And he is so meek.

It's right to sing Christmas carols about how mild, meek he is. And if you have a love affair with the supremacy and the centrality of man, and the supremacy and the centrality of the glory of God is way down here, this Christ, you will reject. And it won't be owing to his inadequacy but to your Copernican inversion of having self and man at the center of your solar system and the sun out there where Pluto is.

That's got to change if you're going to believe. It's called new birth. God do it.

That's number two. The root of unbelief points to the glory of Jesus Christ. Number three, the last one, and we'll be done.

This text, text of this message, John 12, 37 to 50, and the entire public ministry of Jesus points to the cross where he will die for the world, including Israel. He was the glory of Isaiah 6. He was the unattractive, suffering servant of Isaiah 53. And therefore, because of both, he was rejected by men and destined, therefore, for the cross and for the salvation of the world.

This is what God planned in the unbelief of Israel. He was despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

As one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our sorrows and carried our griefs, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions.

He was bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by his stripes we are healed. It was all planned.

There could be no salvation had he not been rejected. It was planned for your peace. It was planned for your healing.

It was planned for your forgiveness through an all-glorious, despised and rejected Messiah. If you love the glory of God rather than the glory of man. Father, I ask that you would now do a cosmic, as it were, rearrangement of the solar systems of our lives, in this room and beyond.

And wherever the sun, S-U-N, of your glory has been displaced from the center, all controlling power of our solar system, and man, ourselves, has been put there. Change it! So that when Jesus shows up, meek, lowly, unattractive, broken, beaten, dying, glorious, powerful, sovereign, majestic, this strange Jesus would not be rejected. Pray this for his glory and for our salvation.

Amen.

Video: <https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/2HP3LR0zLvU.mp4>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/belief-in-jesus-its-barriers-and-blessings/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net