**Livin’ the Life**

**The Tragedy and Triumph of Unbelief**

**John 12:37-50**

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We are continuing our series on the Gospel of John, Livin’ the Life, looking at the life of Jesus and the life he promises. Today we are in John 12:37-50, as we consider The Tragedy and Triumph of Unbelief. This is a difficult passage, we are wading in deeper water as we consider Israel’s unbelief in rejecting Jesus as their Messiah and King. John explains why they rejected him and that their rejection does not mean that Jesus’ mission failed. Israel’s rejection of their Messiah and King was God’s plan that opened the door for Jesus’ mission to go to the nations.

**Israel’s Tragic Unbelief (37-43)**

There are two reasons for unbelief in these verses, the first is God’s hardening and the second is Israel’s love of the glory of others. Let’s look at the first, God’s hardening. Though Jesus had done many signs, Israel still did not believe in him as their Messiah and King which fulfilled Old Testament Scripture (37-38). Jesus performed many miracles to authenticate his message that he was the Messiah. He turned water into wine, healed the sick, miraculously fed fifteen thousand people and even raised the dead. A minority believed but the majority of Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah and King. John explains that this fulfilled the Old Testament when the prophet Isaiah predicted the Servant of the Lord would come and be rejected by his people and killed (Isa 53, especially 1-3). Then John concludes, therefore they could not believe because God blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so that they not repent and believe (39-40). These four verses give us at least three indicators that this unbelief was both predicted *and* planned.[[1]](#footnote-1) These are hard and tragic words. One truth we have seen over and over in the gospel of John is that God is both sovereign - he rules over history, nations, and lives - and yet humanity is still responsible and therefore guilty for our choices. Israel nor anyone else are ever forced into an unbelief that they do not want (1:10-12; 3:1-12).

In the second quote from the Old Testament book of Isaiah (39), God commanded Isaiah to keep preaching to the people yet his preaching will, “Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes (6:10).” God was hardening their hearts by Isaiah preaching God’s message of salvation and judgement. The more Isaiah preached, the more people’s hearts were hardened against God so that they could not be saved. This is what John says is happening in Jesus’ preaching. As Jesus preached and performed miracles, most of Israel became more hostile toward him until they had enough of him and decided to kill him. Yet John tells us that this was planned by God so that Jesus would go to the cross and the gospel would go to the nations. God is not unfair or capricious with Israel. God is just in doing so because rejected Him. God is just to abandon unbelieving people to themselves, solidifying them in their evil so that they don’t see spiritual truth as truth. But it is not as though Israel or anyone else is innocent. They are like all people who are condemned already (3:18) yet God sought to save them. The failure of Jesus’ mission does is because of Israel’s stubborn rejection of God which is confirmed when they reject Jesus’ message. As you read the gospels, you see their rejection in the growing hostility toward Jesus until it gets to the place where they are so fed up with him, they kill him. God’s mercy is meant to lead to repentance (Rom 2:4). Do not presume on God’s mercy toward you. Don’t let the preaching of God’s word harden your heart.

The second reason for unbelief that Isaiah spoke about is that they loved the glory that comes from other men rather than God. John says, nevertheless, many of the religious leaders believed in him but they would not openly confess it because the Pharisees would excommunicate people from the synagogue who confessed faith in Jesus as Messiah and King. They loved the glory of men over the glory of God (42-43). That is, they loved the approval of other people more than the approval of God. That is the root of Israel’s unbelief. Let me show you why I say so. We have already seen that not all who believe have genuine faith (3:23-25; 8:31). Their motive in not giving allegiance to Jesus is the allegiance they give to the approval of others (5:44; 9:18-23). Here is what John is saying. Isaiah saw the coming Servant of the Lord who was going to be rejected because he was not what they wanted (Jn 12:38; Isa 53:1-3). But this Servant is Jesus who Isaiah spoke about, Isaiah saw his glory (41). In Jesus’ day, Israel wanted a strong political and military Messiah but God sent what they needed, a Messiah whose glory was veiled in human flesh who could deliver them from their much greater need, their sinfulness. They did not want this so they rejected Jesus. God gave them exactly what they needed and did not want and in that way, God exposed their rebellion against him and God blinded and hardened their hearts. Do not take advantage of God’s grace and mercy, come to him. We are guilty sinners and if we ignore his mercy, it will lead to our judgement.

**Jesus’ Mission Triumphs (44-50)**

Then John turns to Jesus’ last public words which summarizes his mission and his message. Whoever believes in Jesus, believes in God the Father who sent him. And whoever sees him, sees God the Father who sent him (44-45). The Father sent the Son on a mission to speak on his behalf. Jesus is not just one way to God, Jesus is the only way to God! Christianity is not compatible with other religions. All religions are based upon my work to get to God; Christianity is based on Jesus’ work to get to God. All other great religious figures point us to God while Jesus points us to himself because he is God. Then Jesus summarizes his message, I have come into the world as light so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness (46). Jesus is the light and believing in him as the light frees us from darkness, which represents sin, ignorance and death. Believing in Jesus frees from the power and penalty of sin; gives us the light to see truth and gives us Eternal life.

**Life Group Questions:**

1. Do you remember a time when you thought you were so right but in the end you were completely wrong? Describe it.
2. What is your emotional or guy response to God hardening Israel so that they could not believe?
3. How is God just in hardening Israel’s heart?
4. What is the application for us?
5. How should we react to the fact that the preaching of God’s word both softens and hardens the heart?
6. Why do we love the approval of others?
7. What does John mean when he describes Israel as loving the approval of others rather than the approval of God?
8. Tell of a specific time that you struggled with this issue?
9. How is God speaking to me from this text and how is he asking me to obey him?
10. What summarizes Jesus’ mission?
11. Am I intentionally engaged in his mission also?

1. Israel’s unbelief had the purpose of fulfilling Isaiah (37), Israel’s unbelief was because they could not believe because God blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts (39), and this blinding and hardening was so that they not see and understand (39-40). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)