

Series: Receiving life by believing in God's Son (a Gospel of John study)

Sermon Text: John 12:37-50 (Read Isaiah 6)

Kids Word: Believe

(*Only John tells this part of the story)

John said he wrote this letter to help us find “*fullness of life through believing Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*” We’ve completed 11 chapters of real-life stories of how it looked when people met Jesus and flown through 3 years of Jesus’ public ministry. Chapter 12 caps off these stories, turns us towards the cross, and launches into 10 chapters which detail Jesus’ final week.

- This has been a whirlwind chapter, hasn’t it? It began with Mary’s extravagant devotion where she preemptively anointed Jesus for His burial (12:1-11), then Jesus entered Jerusalem amidst the cheers of a confused crowd (12:12-19). After that, some Greeks showed up to the Jewish Passover to visit Jesus, which He took as a sign that His hour had finally arrived (12:20–36). This final section addresses difficult truths while urging us to consider the following...

BIG IDEA: We must believe in Jesus while there’s still time!

Today, I’ll follow John’s lead by painting a big picture, then sharing some takeaways.

- We’ve reached the end of Jesus’ public ministry, where He did so many incredible things that John said it was impossible to record them all (cf. 21:25). Ironically, *verse 37* says, *though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.* Jewish *unbelief* was a huge hurdle for the newborn church. Think about it...if Israel widely rejected the guy claiming to be their long-promised, God-sent Messiah, then why should Jews or anyone for that matter, trust Jesus? You’ll recall John being up front about this problem in 1:11-12 by saying, “*Jesus came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*” John sought to increase *belief* in Jesus as the Christ and God’s Son. So, isn’t it curious how he and the biblical authors refused to downplay *unbelief* and their own failures? In my mind, such transparency adds to the Bible’s credibility, challenges us to embrace mystery, invites investigation, and shows we don’t need all our questions satisfied to start *believing* in Jesus. I love how the Bible candidly embraces the reality of this world while slowly opening our eyes to a better one. God knew we’d struggle to *believe* that He’s winning when there’s so much evil and *unbelief* or when those we care about walk away. He knew we’d be baffled by Him being sovereign (in control, supreme) over all things, not just good things. For instance, how can He force evil to aid His good purposes without being culpable (cf. Genesis 50:20; Job’s story; Romans 8:28-29)?

- Some of these brain twisters are themes across the entire Bible, like this issue of why many in Israel *still did not believe in Jesus*, which John connected with Isaiah 53. In *verses 38-39* he wants us to realize it was *so the word spoken by the Old Testament 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?" Therefore, they could not believe.*" Isaiah's story is a strange one! As God was recruiting him to be a *prophet* to Israel, God also promised they would not listen! Is that not weird? Isaiah 53 also foretells the suffering of the Messiah, which the Jews neglected to consider as Jesus spoke of seeds and death in *verses 23-36*, so they remained puzzled as to how one Messiah could suffer, die, and still be a powerful ruler. Next, in *verses 40-41*, John quoted from Isaiah 6:10...*For again Isaiah said, "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."* Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. Not only had Isaiah seen the Lord, but somehow the *glory* of that hour was related to this hour of Jesus' *glorification*! Isaiah also spoke of God *blinding Israel's eyes and hardening their hearts*, which of course, could mean more than a direct action and could even be a passive consequence, as we'll see in *verses 46-50*. I mean, if people are already *blind* to the truth, allowing them to remain in their *blindness* isn't much of a leap, right?
- Such a profound subject is perplexing, and when Paul mentioned it in Romans 9, he illustrated the point with the famous story of Moses and Pharaoh. Both men had been steeped in Egyptian culture for decades prior to God appearing to claim ownership of Israel and the world. We're told God *hardened* Pharaoh's *heart* by turning up the heat with plagues, while somehow the *heart* of Moses grew softer over time. Some think this makes God responsible for Pharaoh's rejection, but isn't it true that Pharaoh already viewed Himself as king of the world (sovereign, godlike)? He wasn't about to yield power to anyone, especially not the God of his Hebrew subordinates. So, Pharaoh's *hardhearted* rejection of truth is more expected than remarkable, right? The amazing part is God patiently letting Pharaoh pursue his sinful desires, which ended badly for him, as it does for us (cf. Romans 1:18-32)! The ultimate stunner was God overruling the natural consequences of Pharaoh's evil choices to rescue and prove His love to Israel. The point Biblical authors like Moses, Isaiah, John, and Paul want us to realize is this...stubborn

human rebellion, even by those with power and influence, is unable to stop God's plan to redeem the world, which He promised way back in Genesis 3 and affirmed in Genesis 12.

The Apostle John wants us to remember these truths as we process Jesus' last public sermon. Isn't that something to think about? His final public sermon--the *words* Jesus wanted the *world* to recall after His departure. Since it could be summarized numerous ways, I've chosen to capture its essence in a 3-part sentence...***No matter how dark things get, faith gives us eyes to see that...***

#1: ***The world is improving, one heart at a time.*** (John 12:42-43)

- Following his ominous *words* about Israel in *verses 37-41*, John surprises us with a glimmer of hope in the 1st century darkness. In *verses 42-43* he wrote, *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 more than the glory that comes from God.* Certainly, he was thinking of *Pharisees* like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, which would make this a shockingly graceful description of weak, secret faith that would later blossom into public faith. Which of us started out any better? Sure, Jesus wants us to grow out of that, but bold faith rarely, if ever, happens over night! Should we not be fanning the flame of weak faith rather than criticizing it? I mean, it's nonsense to beat people down over something only God can provide. Furthermore, doesn't the world get a little better with every heart that turns to Jesus? Isn't God's kingdom slowly taking over 1 repentant sinner at a time? According to Luke 15:10, "*There's joy before the angels over one sinner who repents.*" Seems to me the church should do more rejoicing and less grumbling about how bad things are! Instead of embracing the world's faithless chants and non-gospel solutions, it's our job to remind the world Jesus is actively making all things new! ***No matter how dark things get, faith gives us eyes to see that...***#1: ***The world is improving, one heart at a time.***

#2: ***To reject Jesus is to reject God.*** (John 12:44-45)

- In *verses 44-45* Jesus cried out and said, "*Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.*" Once again, this is proof that Jesus is both "God in the flesh" AND "the exact image or representation of God." Sadly, Israel felt He misrepresented the Old Testament God and His Law. So, it was their admirable view of

God's holiness that kept them from seeing how God wants to relate and partner with people in restoring the world. That's why God sent His Son--to clarify centuries of misconceptions about the God of Heaven and affirm the tension between God's supreme holiness and utter human sinfulness, BUT *NEVERTHELESS* Jesus came to bridge the gap! Remember John 3(16-19) where He told Nicodemus He came not to condemn an already condemned world, but to save it? This is the key to how Jesus could be so holy (like His Father), yet so gentle and merciful towards sinful people. *No matter how dark things get, faith gives us eyes to see that...the world is improving, one heart at a time*, that *to reject Jesus is to reject God*, and finally that...

#3: *Truth will have the final say.* (John 12:46-50)

- In verses 46-50 Jesus said, *"I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for 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--what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me."* We must take our cues from Jesus...as the world rejects truth, we don't have to like it, but we also need not become worried, angry, unkind, or condemning. Furthermore, "piling on" judgement is unnecessary since rejecting *truth* has consequences in this life and beyond! Professor Gary Burge wrote, *"The consequences of our decision begin to work themselves upon our lives in the present. It's like a person with a curable disease. The antibiotic begins to reverse the effects of the disease at once; without it, the doom of the infection grows daily...To refuse the medicine is to succumb to the disease. To refuse to have faith is to be swallowed by darkness."* Being a disciple is not about becoming perfect or having perfect knowledge, it's about what Jesus said in *verse 36*, *"While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light."* While I hope you find the answers you're looking for, I mostly hope you **believe in Jesus while there's still time!** He invites us to stop striving, to start trusting Him with what we can't quite grasp, and to let revealed *truth* change how we think and how we live.

Let's pray:

- Father, it seems only right to pray what Paul prayed in Romans 11:33-36 (NLT), “Oh, how great are Your riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand Your decisions and ways! For who can know Your thoughts? Who knows enough to give You advice? And who has given You so much that You needs to pay it back? For everything comes from You and exists by Your power and is intended for Your glory. All glory to You forever! Amen.”

Let’s sing: Please stand and join us as we sing, “Forever God is Faithful.”

So, what’s your NEXT STEP?

- Remember, our next step always begins with faith in Christ. Either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Either way, His Spirit will help you.

Quotes/Additional thoughts:

- **The problem of Israel’s rejection:** “The unbelief of the Jews, and their religious leaders in particular, has been a minor motif throughout the story. There is evidence that it continued to be a major issue in later decades, since one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the path to commitment to Jesus as Messiah for many of John’s contemporaries was the failure of the Jewish people to recognize him as such, during the course of his ministry.” Pastor Bruce Milne
- **The Isaiah reference:** “John echoes the thinking of other New Testament writers when he leads us first to Isaiah 53:1. John then takes us to Isaiah 6:10, which became the classic New Testament explanation for Israel’s rejection of Jesus. Paul cites it in his final speech in Acts (Acts 28:26–27), and the Synoptic Gospels use it to explain why the people cannot comprehend the parables of Jesus (Matt. 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10).” Professor Gary Burge
- **God’s part vs. Man’s part:** “God is not excluded from the response people make to his claims upon them. As he acts in grace to enable and support the faith of those who believe, so he acts to confirm judicially the rejection of those who choose the path of unbelief. This does not, for John, eliminate human responsibility, as his repeated references through the gospel to the challenge of faith indicate, among which Jesus’ appeal for faith in this passage is a particularly clear example (44–50) ... Finally, as John goes on to show, God will use this very rejection to fulfil his purposes of salvation (20:30). More specifically, since Isaiah saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him (41), the rejection of Jesus by Israel was foretold in these Old Testament passages, and so is not outside God’s eternal purpose.” Pastor Bruce Milne
- **The bigger picture:** “In John’s understanding, the hardness of Israel is likewise purposeful: Through Christ’s rejection, salvation will be won for Israel at the cross and the glory of God revealed. Unbelieving Jews will crucify him. Moreover, through their refusal the gospel now comes to the rest of the world. Paul makes the same claim in Romans 9:22–33: God is at work sealing judgment in the present in order to achieve a long-term purpose.” Professor Gary Burge
- **Truth as a judge:** “The result is sadly clear. When Jesus speaks the words of love, the words of God, the words that would heal the world, people who reject those words will find themselves confronted in the end, not by Jesus himself, but by those very words, the words they have heard, the words they can’t pretend they didn’t hear. The words themselves will be judges, will rise up and condemn them. The words will have this power because they are the words which the father himself has instructed Jesus to say. He was speaking the words God

gave him to speak. People who believe him, therefore, are believing in God; people who look at him and see who he truly is are looking, as in a mirror, upon the true reflection of God.”

Professor NT Wright

- **Making sense of this passage:** “When John describes the hardening of Jesus’ audiences in 12:37–41, he is not saying that God has forced into unbelief men and women who otherwise would have believed. It is wrong to conclude from 12:37–41 that John supports an extreme determinism in which God assigns otherwise neutral people to faith and others to unbelief. John’s comment here is that people who refuse to believe will experience judgment. For these men and women ‘the eschatological verdict has already come. For this reason, they cannot believe. For them it is too late.’ Paul has this same view in 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12 when he describes those who have aligned themselves with Satan and have refused to love the truth and be saved. ‘For this reason, God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.’ The significance of this is twofold. (1) It underscores the urgency of coming to faith. The natural state of the world we inhabit is darkness, which God’s light has penetrated in Christ. Those who refuse the light will find it extinguished and the darkness closing over them. (2) It assures us that when we are confronted with hardened unbelief, it does not mean that God has lost control, but that God is ‘active in judgment as well as in salvation.’ ...John describes what we might call a ‘judicial’ hardening that settles on a people who are already guilty. When revelation comes, we must believe. But if we refuse to believe, the light disappears (12:35–36); and when God’s light departs from the world, the darkness (which is the default state of the world) closes over unbelieving hearts. (In John’s literary schema, this is why Jesus disappears in 12:36b.) Paul makes a similar argument in Romans 1. The consequence of the world’s sin and unbelief is God’s judgment, in which he ‘gives them over’ to their sinful instincts (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).” Professor Gary Burge

Contextual items:

- **Book Context:** The Gospel of the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, provides a clearly stated purpose. *John 20:30-31* says, “*Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*” Some people demand to have all their questions satisfied before bowing to Jesus, yet John claimed his limited account was enough to bring anyone to faith. As we read it, our Savior and friend emerges from the pages as a real person in the real world. Jesus shows us what we could become, if we too would rely on His infinite Father who will gladly supply whatever we need.
- **Life in his name:** Life is the Greek word, “zōē”, which means “Life, Living, Lifetime, Life-Giving” and is where we get the word, “zoology” in English. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words says it’s “used in the NT of life as a principle, life in the absolute sense, life as God has it, that which the Father has in Himself, and which He gave to the Incarnate Son to have in Himself, Jhn 5:26, and which the Son manifested in the world, 1Jo 1:2. From this life man has become alienated in consequence of the Fall, Eph 4:18, and of this life men become partakers through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, Jhn 3:15, who becomes its Author to all such as trust in Him, Act 3:15, and who is therefore said to be 'the life' of the believer, Col 3:4, for the life that He gives He maintains, Jhn 6:35, 63. Eternal life is the present actual

possession of the believer because of his relationship with Christ, Jhn 5:24; 1Jo 3:14, and that it will one day extend its domain to the sphere of the body is assured by the Resurrection of Christ, 2Cr 5:4; 2Ti 1:10. This life is not merely a principle of power and mobility, however, for it has moral associations which are inseparable from it, as of holiness and righteousness. Death and sin, life and holiness, are frequently contrasted in the Scriptures.”

Other Articles/Songs/Videos:

Helpful thoughts for discussion leaders:

1. Go for a single, not a home run...don't drag the night out; realize more people = less deep sharing.
2. Keep discussion around 30mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.

Challenge Questions

Review the BIG IDEA: We must believe in Jesus while there's still time!

-Simple questions...What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Preparation questions for John 12:37-50.

- How do the Isaiah passages explain Israel's 1st century unbelief? (12:37-41)
- What “glimmer of hope” does John offer in 12:42-43? Does it sound hopeful to you?
- What is Jesus saying about the power of God's Word (truth) and the urgency of belief in 12:44-50?

Application questions from John 12:37-50.

- What do you find troubling about God? What do you find comforting about God? Do you think faith can exist somewhere in the middle? Please explain.
- In verse 42, John pivoted a somewhat dark conversation by using the word, “Nevertheless.” What's been troubling you lately (the thing that keeps popping into your head)? How could a phrase like, “Nevertheless God...” or “But God...” help redirect your mind and bring comfort to your soul?
- Where have you found it challenging to reconcile Jesus with the God of the Old Testament? What have you learned about Jesus that helps you make sense of how such a holy God can be in relationship with such a sinful creation?
- In verses 46-50, Jesus said the truth will have the final say. Where do you need to quit piling on judgment and leave that up to God? How might that help you become more like Jesus in love, mercy, gentleness, helpfulness, etc.?

Here are some great resources for digging deeper into community group life...

How life together looks <http://austinstone.org/stories/film/item/140-missional-community-lukes-story>

Rethinking what we do https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvWnXYSELF4&feature=player_embedded

Numerous articles to provoke thought <http://tod dengstrom.com/archives/>

What groups of 2-3 might look like <http://tod dengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LTG-Overview.pdf>