

I Met Jesus: the Crowds and the Cowards

John 12:36-43

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Steve Dewitt

Thus far in our series, we have been introduced to many interesting people who met Jesus in the gospel of John: the woman at the well, Nicodemus, the blind man, etc. They all have one general thing in common – their interaction with Jesus produced in them a dramatic change. They were affected by the encounter and became followers of Jesus – some famously, like John the Baptist; others quietly like Nicodemus. This has been a challenge to us to be like them and to allow our own faith encounter with Jesus to be fully transformational to our lives.

We could get the idea from these people that everybody who met Jesus loved Him and was changed by Him and enthusiastically followed Him. Or maybe we could speculate what the response would be if Jesus were here on earth now if He were lecturing at the University of Chicago or speaking at the UN. What if He walked the hallways of Rush Presbyterian Cancer ward healing each and every one? If only Jesus were here today, everybody would believe in Him and follow Him, right? If we were a church more like Jesus, everybody would become Christians, right?

If we look past the highlight reel of Jesus' ministry, we actually see a progression the opposite way. When He was here, the whole world didn't fall at His feet, at least not in any enduring way. The longer He was around, the less popular He became. His miracles were dramatic, but not everybody who witnessed them believed. Perhaps the best example of His fall from favor was His final week in Jerusalem. On Sunday He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. Children are singing. Adults are shouting Messianic psalms over Him. Palm branches are being waved. The whole city was enraptured with Him. Five days later, they killed Him. How did that happen? Why did that happen?

Today, rather than an individual, we look at two groups of people who met Jesus and whose responses were lacking – *The Crowds and the Cowards*.

So Jesus said to them, "The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. (John 12:35-36)

This occurred on Tuesday of His final week. Jesus is in Jerusalem. He gives the crowds a clear call to faith in Him, which He describes as "walking in the light." Walking in darkness is a spiritual metaphor for not knowing where you are going. Light is faith. Darkness is unbelief.

The Crowds – A Theology of Unbelief

John 12:37-43 is a literary interlude of commentary where John assesses the overall response to Jesus' ministry.

Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, 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?" Therefore they could not believe. 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. 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." (John 12:37-43)

We are going to focus on the crowds, but I do want to note that one response to Jesus was a cowardly faith. Verse 42 says that many leaders believed in Him but were intimidated by the Pharisees. They were unwilling to count the cost of identifying with Christ. John explains the core problem as loving man's glory rather than wanting God's glory. It's not our focus today, but it bears asking the question, are there cowards among us? Are you one of them? Am I? I suppose we all struggle to a degree with this. This passage explains our hearts in those moments when we instinctively know that identifying with Christ or Christianity will cost the approval of others. It really is a value judgment moment. Do I value man's approval or God's? I would encourage each of us to meditate on John 12:43. Whose glory are we living for?

But what about the crowds? The general population? How did they respond to Jesus? John summarizes it at the beginning of his gospel:

He 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 1:11-12)

He came to His own. He came to the Jews. But as a whole, they did not receive Him. Many did, clearly. But when compared to the population in general, and the leadership in particular, He was not "received." He was not accepted, and for sure, not believed in.

Does this strike anyone else as hard to understand? How could any objective observer see the kinds of miracles that Jesus did and NOT believe in Him? The same way someone can intellectually understand Christianity and NOT actually believe it. Not be saved by its message. Not be changed by our Savior and the Holy Spirit.

John explains resolute unbelief theologically. There is something much deeper going on. John gets there by quoting two Old Testament prophecies that said the Messiah would be rejected – Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 6.

The Isaiah 53 passage is clearly Messianic. In fact, famously so. We have a family in our church who heads a ministry outreach to Jews and Isaiah 53 is one of their most powerful arguments. They ask Jews, who is this describing? *He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities.* (Isaiah 53:5) This clearly messianic passage ALSO says in verse 1, *Who has believed?* In spite of all that He is, as Son of David, the root of Jesse and the anointed one of God, His ministry would be one of final rejection. John didn't use it, but later in Isaiah 53 it reads, *He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.* (Isaiah 53:3)

Isaiah 6 explains unbelief as the result of God hardening their hearts. The chapter begins with this dazzling vision of the Lord high and lifted up. Isaiah saw the Lord. In fact, Isaiah 12:41 says that Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus specifically; the pre-incarnate Jesus. Theologians call these Old Testament appearances of Jesus, *Christophanies*.

The Lord says, *"Whom shall I send?"* (Isaiah 6:8). Isaiah responds with the words that have summoned missionaries and pastors to go around the world, *"Here am I! Send me."* (Isaiah 6:8) What follows could only be described as discouraging if you are Isaiah. You would expect such a powerful call to ministry from God that could only mean the bearing of incredible spiritual fruit. Revivals breaking out from Isaiah's ministry. To the contrary, God basically tells him, *"They will hear but they will not understand."* How is that for a call to ministry? *Go to people who won't give a rip about what you have to say. They won't listen. They won't change. Your ministry is going to be largely fruitless and forgettable. Have a nice day.* Most missionaries and pastors would find another calling. But John takes this passage from Isaiah and applies it to people's response to Jesus.

"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." (John 12:40)

Why don't people get it? Why won't even a miracle by itself bring about saving faith? Why doesn't God's Word and gospel automatically do it? *"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart."* What? It's one thing to think that people have chosen not to believe, but it's another to see God active in their NOT choosing.

Here we are on the horns of great mystery between divine sovereignty and man's responsibility. The Bible clearly teaches both are true. God is sovereign and man is responsible, which seems like an apparent contradiction to us, but it's not to God. It shows the complexity of the human heart and its brokenness and the power of God to decree and to save.

But doesn't it also help explain John 11? Jesus raises Lazarus after he was dead for four days. It's a miracle without peer in the entire Bible. The crowd was there. They were stunned. The text says many believed, but not everybody. Some of them were appalled and went and reported it to the Pharisees. How could this be? How could someone witness that and in their heart think, *He's going to have to step it up and show me something really special for me to believe in him. Resurrection just doesn't get there for me.* Even the harshest critic would have to say, *"Now that was pretty impressive."* It seems silly, but it was completely rational and understandable to them. Why? Their heart was hardened in unbelief. That's what it looks like to be in the dark. What is going on?

- *"...the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear."* (Deuteronomy 29:3-4)
- *"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."* (Romans 1:21)

There is a kind of seeing that doesn't really see. So that two people can experience exactly the same event; one is praising God and the other doesn't get it. Why? Belief and unbelief. Light and darkness. The unregenerate man apart from God's grace does not have the ability to see and understand in his soul spiritual truth no matter how clear it is. Even resurrection.

"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14)

The natural man can understand spiritual truth to a point. They can even assent to it, but that assent is not saving faith. It is therefore not transformational. It produces no lasting repentance or change. It's a simple illustration from years ago but there's truth in it, "Many people miss heaven by 12 inches." That's the distance from the mind to the heart.

The second best example of this is Judas who lived three years with Jesus and saw it all and betrayed Him to his death for 30 pieces of silver. Judas, seriously? What were you thinking? The number one example is Satan himself who served God in the courts of heaven and yet led a rebellion of angels against Him. Satan has seen it all. James says the demons believe in God and shudder. Unbelief isn't necessarily a lack of knowledge. **Unbelief is a heart hardened against the surrender required to embrace Jesus and treasure Him above all as my Savior and Lord.**

See but not really see. Hear but not really hear. Know but not really understand. Might that be you today? You're like the crowd in Jesus' day. You've heard it. It's registering in your brain and it may even stir an emotion, but something in you keeps you from really giving your full trust to it. Ravi Zacharias says it this way, "The Scriptures teach that the problem with human unbelief is not the absence of evidence; rather, it is the suppression of it."

So when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in chapter 11, some people believed and some people left in horror. Both are choices. Both groups are responsible to God for their choices. Both chose freely in a moral world in which our choices fulfill God's purposes. That is the explanation of verse 39, "*Therefore they could not believe.*" The human heart is spiritually broken in such a way that apart from God's initiative to give saving faith, none of us would believe. We cannot. As one writer comments, this is a "*holy condemnation of a guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen.*" (D.A. Carson, John, p. 448-9.)

Understanding unbelief helps us understand saving belief. The faith that saves is a response to God's grace and mercy to me in Jesus. It's not merely a consent or acknowledgment, but a complete trusting and resting entirely on Jesus who died for me. This kind of believing is so beyond our ability to come up with ourselves, it has to come from God. The Bible calls it a gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). "*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.*" (Milne, John, p. 193.) **In other words, our unbelief is our fault. Our saving faith is God's fault.**

Two Modern Examples

Here we are in the Christmas season; a season that seems to begin earlier and earlier each year. How long have Christmas decorations been up at the mall? If you were from another planet and came to our country and observed our whole country celebrating Christmas in the manner we do, what might you think? You may ask someone, "So what does this word "Christmas" mean?"

"Well, it's a compound word. "Christ" and the ancient "mass," which was The Lord's Supper. Christ is the biblical title for Jesus and the Lord's Supper celebrates what he did dying for us. So the word Christmas means "celebrating Jesus who came to save us."

"What are these decorations everywhere for?"

"Our culture celebrates Jesus coming to save us."

"What about all these songs I hear in the background of the stores?"

"They are songs about Jesus like, 'O holy Night the stars are brightly shining/it is the night of our dear Savior's birth' or 'Joy to the World! the Lord has come...let heaven and nature sing...'"

"Interesting...So are all the people shopping for presents at the mall and all the people decorating their homes with Christmas lights and all the people you pass real believers in Jesus?"

"No! Are you kidding? It's one giant celebration of something most of us don't really believe."

Something's clearly not getting through to our culture. Seeing but not seeing. Hearing but not hearing. Knowing but not understanding. That is what unbelief is – the suppression of truth that could save, but it doesn't and therefore, it can't.

Another example of modern unbelief is Christopher Hitchens (pictured below).



You may have seen in the news that Hitchens died on Thursday. You may or may not know who he is. He and Richard Dawkins are the two most well-known modern day atheists. He was a brilliant writer and thinker and held many debates with evangelicals. Hitchens understood Christianity. In fact, he probably understood it better than most Christians. But that didn't mean that he believed it.

A few years ago a film was made of a series of debates between Hitchens and Pastor Douglas Wilson, entitled "Collision." The movie ends with the two of them in the back of a limo and Hitchens, the famous atheist, says this:

"If I could convert everyone in the world – not convert, if I could convince – to be a non-believer and I'd really done brilliantly, and there's only one left, one more, and then it'd be done – there'd be no more religion in the world, no more deism, theism, I wouldn't do it...I don't quite know why I wouldn't do it. And it's not just because there'd be...no one left to argue with. It's not just that, though it would be that. Somehow if I could drive it out of the world, I wouldn't."

In these words we hear the most famous and articulate atheist of our time groping in the darkness of his unbelief for something he instinctively knew he needed.

Where are you today? Missing heaven by 12 inches? What is needed is what Jesus said in verse 36, *While you have the light, believe in the Light*. Jesus is that light. May you believe fully and truly in him today.

The flip side of this is that for genuine believers here today, we are reminded of God's gracious act in allowing us to see who Christ is and to believe in him. Who can boast? Who

can say, “Look at me”? What do we have that God has not given to us? Let’s allow this reminder to humble us and rekindle in our hearts the wonder that God would show such love to us.

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