



THE MIRACLE OF UNBELIEF

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 12: 27-50

27th Message

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This has been an emotional season for many of us. As we celebrate anniversaries and graduations, we find that close friends are moving away. As we welcome new babies into the world, some among us are having to deal with the painful news of loved ones becoming seriously ill. While our young people feel liberated from teachers and text books, there are broken dreams and strained relationships among us as we enter the summer season.

Last week in our family we celebrated a wedding anniversary, a birthday, and a graduation. We enjoyed moments of lighthearted fun and deep joy together. But I was reminded again of my own frailty and sin, as in the midst of a time of great joy I found myself in a fight with my wife — in front of her parents. Just when life ought to be going along smoothly, it seems, we are often reminded of our weakness and failure. We can be assaulted with temptation, paralyzed by fear.

In our study in the gospel of John this morning we will discover the good news that Someone has indeed done something about the problem of evil in our world, however. John's gospel does not include an account of the agony of body which Jesus suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane, but in the twelfth chapter, John includes an incident, sometimes referred to as "little Gethsamane," as it does reflect that same agony of spirit that Jesus felt perhaps a mere two days later in the garden.

Let's begin reading at John 12:27:

"Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Thy name." There came therefore a voice out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." The multitude therefore, who stood by and heard it, were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, "An angel has spoken to Him." Jesus answered and said, "This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die. The multitude therefore answered Him, "We have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain forever; and how can You say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus therefore said to them, "For a little while longer the light is among you. Walk while you have the light, that darkness may not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not

know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, in order that you may become sons of light." These things Jesus spoke, and He departed and hid Himself from them.

Here is John's record of Jesus' last public words. The hour for which he came had dawned at last. Soon, the grain of wheat would die and fall into the ground.

The thought of dying troubled Jesus. It would trouble us, too. Nobody wants to die. Jesus was aware of the terrible ordeal that lay ahead for him. We should never forget the fearful agony he suffered: the painful betrayal by a close friend; the arrest; the shame and humiliation of his appearance like a criminal before the high priest and King Herod; the kangaroo court; the scourgings and the mockery; the cruel beatings; the agony of the cross; the nails driven through his hands and feet; the spear thrust in his side; and above all, the separation from the Father, which was to wring from him that awful cry, "Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus suffered the horror of hell itself. Should he ask to be saved from this hour? No, he concluded. Such a prayer would be inappropriate. This was the hour for which he had come. J.R.R. Tolkien has his hobbit, Frodo, complain to Gandalf, the Wizard, "Why was I born at this hour?" Gandalf replied, "You were born *for* this hour." Jesus was born for this hour. It was the Father's will to bruise him now (Isa. 53:10). And so he prayed, "Father, glorify your name." This was the prayer that the Father heard and answered.

And the Father hears and answers this prayer today. At times when I want to avoid things like suffering, loneliness, misunderstanding, temptation and conflict, I, too, want to pray, "Father, save me from this hour." But we don't have any assurance that he will answer this kind of prayer, do we? Yet we can pray with assurance, "Father, glorify your name."

Verses 31 and 32 reveal two reasons why Jesus had to die. First, an enemy had to be defeated; and second, the world had to be won. First, the enemy, the "prince of this world" (Satan) had to be cast out. The world had to be judged and set right. But before that could happen, the prince of this world had to be cast out.

In this so-called enlightened age it is considered uneducated to believe in a real, personal devil. But Jesus did. He took the devil very seriously indeed. And because he did, so must we. We need to be reminded that the world is being ruled by a cruel despot far worse than Hitler or

Saddam Hussein. Such men were mere puppets. Unseen, behind the scenes, the real ruler of the world is working his mischief: smashing our dreams, crushing our hopes, violating our human rights. Satan fills the world with his brand of misery: a melange of guilt, doubt, and depression. That is why reform in the human sphere is impossible. Politicians, however sincere or noble their promises, can make no lasting change because they are not equipped to deal with the real power behind human events.

The analogy of a puppet is appropriate. When the villain puppet comes onstage we can boo and hiss, but it is useless to use our energy attacking him; the puppeteer will simply replace him with another puppet. Nothing of any consequence will happen until the puppeteer is gotten rid of.

It is the same with the world. The real enemy of the human race has to be chased out. And at Calvary, in the cross of Christ, he was banished. The demons conspired to destroy Jesus, but at earth's darkest time, the devil and all of his demons were once and for all defeated. So Christ's hour of greatest tragedy was in fact the hour of his greatest triumph.

The Book of Revelation, also written by John, tells this story in picture form. According to Revelation 12, John saw a woman (representing Israel) who gave birth to a child (Jesus, cf. Isa. 9:6) Then he saw a red dragon (the devil), invested with great intelligence (7 heads), power (10 horns), and authority (7 diadems). This was no paper dragon, however. He pursued the child to try to kill it as soon as it was born (Herod, and the slaughter of the innocents). But the child survived and grew into a King who was then taken up into heaven (his rule is over a spiritual kingdom). Then John saw a war in heaven, but the dragon and his angels (the stars mentioned in v. 4) were "not strong enough" to defeat the kingdom. They were tossed out of heaven. In other words, they have no power to do damage to the kingdom of heaven (us!). And then John heard a song of triumph: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been thrown down."

A long-term spiritual battle had been raging in heaven, but the cross was the final event in the cosmic struggle. In a decisive action (at the cross) Satan was soundly defeated and thrown out of paradise. As Jesus put it in another place, the strong man was defeated by one who was stronger. That means that we as Christians have been freed from the devil's domination. His power over the human race has been broken. We have "overcome him by the blood of the Lamb." Our enemy has been defeated.

The second reason Jesus had to die was so that the world could be won. Jesus said in 12:32, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." Perhaps you have heard this text explained to say that if we lift Jesus up (in the sense of exalting him), others will

be attracted to him. There is a popular chorus that explains this text in that way. Although the phrase "lift up" is used that way in other places, however, that is not what Jesus intended here. Jesus was lifted up on the cross as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness. Morally, the cross was a degradation, not an exaltation. Jesus used the phrase deliberately so as to arrest our thoughts. To him, the cross was a triumph, not a defeat. In the word "all," Jesus did not mean everyone. He meant all kinds of people: men and women, rich and poor, black and white, yellow and red, tough guys and nerds. Anyone can come. It is God's love displayed in the cross that draws them all to Jesus. There the goodness of God was displayed for all time.

But the Jews had great difficulty with this. When they heard Jesus say that the Son of Man was to die, they challenged his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Son of Man (a messianic title) would live forever, they said. "He will reign eternally" (Dan. 7:14; Ps, 110:4; Isa. 9:7 and others). Who was *this* Son of Man? (the Messiah he was referring to) they wondered. What they failed to understand, of course, was that description of the Suffering Messiah who made himself an offering for sin. Only a dying and resurrected Messiah fully explained the Hebrew Scriptures.

Their question was left unanswered because it wasn't the real reason for their unbelief. Intellectual reasons rarely are. Pascal said, "The heart always has reasons that reason doesn't have." The problem lay in their hearts: they were darkened. But the Light was standing before them. And Jesus reminded them that the light was temporary; soon it would be removed.

At times people who are walking in darkness catch a glimpse of the light: they see, and learn the truth about Jesus. But if they fail to seize the opportunity and respond to the light, darkness closes in again: Jesus hides himself. These are the tragic words he uses to conclude his final discourse: "These things Jesus spoke, and He departed and hid Himself from them." Not only was his public ministry drawing to a close, but by his withdrawing he was acting upon the judicial warning he had just uttered.

This event, as we have pointed out, marked the end of Jesus' public ministry as it is reported in John's gospel. Chapters 13 through 17, which make up what has been called the Upper Room Discourse, were addressed to his disciples alone; and chapters 18 through 22 record his passion and resurrection. But before John brings this section to a close he feels compelled to give his theological reflections on the unbelief of his own people. The great majority of Jews were excluded from the kingdom, shut out by their own unbelief. Not even the miraculous signs, whose very purpose was to foster belief (20:30-31), proved adequate to stimulate their faith. In Deuteronomy 29:3-4, Moses said, "With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear." Some explanation must be given for this large-scale, cat-

astrophic unbelief. John gives that in verses 37-50:

But though He had performed so many signs before them, (yet) they were not believing in Him; that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "He has blinded their eyes, and He hardened their heart; lest they see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and be converted, and I heal them." These things Isaiah said, because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing (Him,) lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

How tragic! Men did not believe in Jesus in spite of all that he had done. Such unbelief seems unbelievable, doesn't it? It seems illogical. John was witness to this stubborn misunderstanding of Jesus and angry rejection of him and his message by the very ones who should have accepted him at every turn. We remember that he summarized this rejection in his prologue in chapter 1: "He came to his own, and His own did not receive Him."

To explain the rejection, John quotes two passages from the prophet Isaiah. On the surface, it appears Isaiah was saying that the Jews never had a chance; that God hardened their hearts at the outset. But that is not accurate. John's first quote, from Isaiah 53, reveals that the Jews were the first ones to see the light. It was to them the good news was first reported. The second quote, from Isaiah 6, shows that when light shines and it is rejected, God turns it off. It was not that Israel could not believe. (They were the first to have opportunity to believe.) Their light therefore was withdrawn. Their eyes were blinded, their hearts were deadened. They no longer were able to turn and be healed.

Isaiah had been sent by God to prophesy, but he was forewarned that his preaching would bring no results. On the contrary, the more he preached, the less positive results he would get. The very message designed to summon men to repentance would drive them farther from God. John cites Isaiah's experience as an explanation of Jesus' ministry. The problem is that the unregenerate heart is callous to the message of God.

That truth still stands. God does not force truth on us. If we prefer the darkness, he will let us have the darkness. If we refuse to act on truth, we will finally lose the ability to recognize truth. Someone has said,

There is a line by us unseen
That crosses every path,
The hidden boundary between
God's patience and his wrath.

Only God knows where that line is drawn. If we turn our backs to the light, to the Son of Righteousness, we may someday inherit the darkness we asked for and find ourselves totally alone

John concludes with a powerful summary of the ministry of Jesus. These words were not uttered by our Lord on this occasion (remember he had hidden himself from the crowd), but they are a summary of what he had said during his ministry. With a sense of urgency now, John presses a serious consideration of the claims of Christ. Verse 44:

And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him who sent Me. And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me. I have come (as) light into the world, that everyone who believes in Me may not remain in darkness. And if anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me."

What a clear and confident promise we have in these verses! Because we know Jesus, we know the Father. And we know why we know him, and how others can know him as well. We know what God is like. If we see Jesus, we have seen the Father. We can become profound theologians. If we have Jesus, we have light. His words shed light on our problems. We have an understanding of the nature of man that no secular psychologist has. We can be more perceptive about our society than any unbelieving sociologist. We can make moral judgments about which others are confused. We can say with assurance that divorce is bad; gay is not good; drugs are harmful; abortion is wrong.

And so John leaves us with the question of Jesus and the seriousness of this choice. What are you going to do about Jesus? This is by far the most important question you will ever ask yourself. If John is right, and I am utterly convinced that he is, then there is no other way to God except through Jesus. It is Jesus or nothing at all.

Unbelief is not a polite unwillingness to assent to the facts, but a calculated refusal to listen to the truth as it is in Jesus and acknowledge his claims on your life.

The *Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis, are wonderful, deeply theological adventure stories. I would like to close by reading for you a scene from the fourth book, *The Silver Chair*. A little girl named Jill finds herself in a strange land, stranded and alone in the woods because of her own pride and foolishness. Lost, lonely and very thirsty, she hears the gurgling of a brook and seeks out the source of the sound. When she gets closer to the source, she sees Aslan, the Lion (who is symbolic of Jesus) lying across her path to the stream:

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion.

"I'm dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

"May I - could I - would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

"Will you promise not to - do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" she said.

"I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

"I dare not come and drink," said Jill.

"Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

"Oh, dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream," said the Lion.

It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion—no one who had seen his stern face could do that—and her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she ever had to do, but she went forward to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted.

The most urgent decision we will face in life is what to do with Jesus Christ. We cannot get away with calling him a good man, a great teacher, or a prophet. He is King. He is Lord. Have you caught a glimpse of his light? If you have, I urge you to respond to it today. There is no promise that you will see it again.

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