

Text: John 12 37-50

Title: "Explaining inexplicable unbelief"

Time: 6/29/2025 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: At the close of Jesus's ministry, the disciples numbered 120 souls who were told to wait in Jerusalem for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out, and after Peter's message roughly three thousand souls were added to the original 120 on that one day (Acts 2:41).

A few days later, after the healing of the lame man in the temple, a number that included 5000 men believed on Christ for salvation (Acts 4:4). By the time we get to Acts 21, James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem can speak of the "many thousands" of the Jews who had believed.

The Apostle John witnessed this amazing birth of the early church. And yet a generation later, now ministering at the church of Ephesus, John writes in his Gospel about a very different scene in verse 37. He is writing about these conditions of unbelief among his fellow Jews during the life of Christ, undoubtedly because he sees similar conditions of unbelief all around him at this later time. And even as he looked back at the many thousands of the Jerusalem revivals, he knew that there were many more thousands who did not believe. Perhaps John asked himself, "What could possibly explain such widespread unbelief?"

Jesus lamented the widespread unbelief He saw (Matt. 23:37): "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not."

Perhaps Matthew too wondered: "How could it be that they would not?"

The Apostle Paul wrestled to understand the plight of unbelievers. He wrote to the Romans: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (9:1-3). Many of us here today feel the same way about the inexplicable unbelief of our friends and family.

John faces this inexplicable unbelief squarely in our passage, having come to the end of his account of the public ministry of the Lord Jesus. He offers here an explanation for inexplicable unbelief. He does so, so that those who read his Gospel might be cured of this condition. He writes this explanation of unbelief so that it might not be true of us, so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name.

I would like us to understand two things John says about inexplicable unbelief, and we will take the passage in reverse order to do so. At the end of the passage, John tells us why unbelief is tragically inexplicable – why it makes no sense for an unbeliever not to believe. And at the beginning of the passage, John gives his explanation for this inexplicable unbelief.

I. Why unbelief is inexplicable (vv. 44-50).

Illustration: Pitcher Jack "Waddy" Wadsworth spent four years playing major league baseball. Waddy was not a very good pitcher. Over those four seasons, he posted a 6 win – 38 loss record and gave up nearly seven runs per nine innings pitched. Waddy had over 100 more walks than strikeouts.

But Wadsworth is remembered still today for a talent that few (if any) other pitchers had. While pitching, he had the ability to get batters thrown out of games. Waddy had a ventriloquist ability, and instead of the ball, he could throw his voice in the direction of home plate, making it sound like the batter was insulting the umpire. The umpire would believe Waddy's deception, get mad at the batter, and throw him out of the game [www.mlb.com/news/the-baseball-player-ventriloquist; accessed 6/11/2025].

Application: Clearly, no baseball-ventriloquist should be believed by an umpire. The speech of a pitcher like that is deception. It has no legitimate claim on credibility. The Jews treated the message of Jesus as though it too had no claim on credibility. They could not be more wrong about the words of Jesus. Simply put, Jesus's words were true, and this fact made their unbelief inexplicable. Jesus mentions three reasons why His words were truth.

1. Jesus was sent by the Father, so unbelief is inexplicable (vv. 44-46). The whole Old Testament tells us that God would send a special descendant to save His people from the devastation of the serpent of the Garden of Eden. Jesus is this descendant. That the Father sent Jesus means that Jesus existed prior to coming to this earth as the virgin's child. It also means that to believe Jesus is to believe God the Father (v. 44), and even more it means that to see Jesus is to see the Father (v. 45).

Illustration: I am closer to my wife than any other person on earth. If I send her with a message to you, it may be true that when you believe her, you are believing me. But it would never be true that when you see her, you are seeing me.

The relationship that Jesus claims to have with the Father is much closer than the one I have with my wife. It is one of

common identity as deity (vv. 44-45). To see Jesus is to see the Father. This makes Jesus the light of the world and the true object of saving faith (v. 46). And because Jesus is the preexistent, eternal Son of God, whom the Father has sent as the light of the world, everyone who believes in Him for salvation no longer remains in darkness. For this reason, if you are in the darkness of unbelief this morning, your unbelief is inexplicable and inexcusable. How could you possibly not see the light that the Father sent into the world?

2. Judgment day is coming, so unbelief is inexplicable (vv. 47-48). John has already told us a few things about the “last day” in verse 48. We know from the Lord’s Bread of Life teaching in chapter 6 and Martha’s comments to the Lord in chapter 11, before the raising of Lazarus, that this last day is a day of glorious resurrection of believers, when their mortal bodies shall put on immortality, the day when that last enemy of theirs – physical death – shall be finally defeated.

But here we find that the last day for unbelievers, also their resurrection day, is a day of final judgment. Jesus did not come this first time for this purpose. He came instead to save His people from their sins (v. 47). He came speaking the word of salvation, but this word of salvation, when rejected, becomes the word of the condemnation of the sinner (v. 48).

We read about this judgment in Revelation 20, where it is said that “the books were opened.” When Jesus here says that His word would judge the sinner who rejects salvation, I think He is predicting that His word would be written down in a book, perhaps this Gospel of John, and it would be this book that is opened on judgment day to show how inexplicable and inexcusable unbelief truly was. We avoid being condemned by Jesus’s words in the last day only by truly believing His words now. We have our Bibles opened this morning to do exactly this.

3. The Father's commandment is eternal life, so unbelief is inexplicable (vv. 49-50). Jesus speaks here of a commandment the Father gave to Him. Specifically, it is a commandment about what to say and what to speak (v. 49). The commandment is not redundant when it commands "what to say" and "what to speak." Westcott: "That is, as to the substantial contents and the varying manner of my message." In other words, Jesus says what He says in this passage because the Father commanded Him to say it, and Jesus says it in the manner He does, because the Father command Him to speak it in that manner. He is crying out His message (v. 44).

Both the content of the message of Jesus and the way the message is presented are parts of the meaning of the message. To be like Jesus, we must declare God's message, not our own, and we must do so in the way God wants it to be declared, not in the way we think others may want to hear it. It may be we do not like what Jesus says or how He says it, but because both come from the Father's commandment, which is eternal life, a response of unbelief is inexplicable.

Because Jesus was sent by the Father, because judgment day is coming, and because the Father's commandment about what to say and how to say it is eternal life, to not believe is in one important sense inexplicable, and in every sense senseless and tragic. It is failure to believe God's saving truth. Contemplating the tragedy of this inexplicable unbelief, John offers an explanation for it at the beginning of our passage. He does so so that we might believe.

II. The explanation for inexplicable unbelief (vv. 37-43).

Illustration: We who are parents have asked our kids to tell us "why" sometimes. "Why have you not yet cleaned up your room?" We know the answer is that they decided to

play video games instead, but we still ask “why” to help them understand the answer the way we do.

Application: I believe that is the kind of question the Lord asks the people of Israel in Ezek. 33:11 – “Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” God knew why they would not turn from their evil ways and live, but He wanted them to see why. In our passage in John, the apostle mentions three reasons unbelievers continue in their inexplicable unbelief. This is why unbelievers would rather die than believe.

1. They do not believe because the Savior and His salvation are not what they expected (vv. 37-39a). Verse 38 quotes Isaiah’s rhetorical questions in Isa. 53:1. Isaiah asks these questions to predict that the gospel would be believed by only a few. And then in the next verses, Isaiah tells us why this would be the case (Isa. 53:2-4).

Unbelievers expect the Savior to have a pleasant form and comeliness. Sinners expect salvation to be beautiful, popular, joyful, and loved by all, and instead the Savior was without beauty, rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and despised. Unbelievers do not believe because the Savior is not what they expected, just like Isaiah predicted. Their unbelief is a fulfillment of this prediction. Is the Savior what you expected, or has He taken you by surprise?

2. They do not believe because the Savior’s message blinds and hardens them (vv. 39b-41). Notice with me that, as John quotes Isaiah 6, he mentions “He,” “His,” and “Him.” This *He* shuts the eyes of unbelievers and hardens their hearts; Isaiah saw *His* glory; and Isaiah spoke concerning *Him*. The

person referred to as *He/His/Him* in verses 40-41 is the same person referred to as *Him* in verse 42.

This is Jesus Christ. When Isaiah spoke about Yahweh (Jehovah), he spoke about Jesus Christ. When Isaiah saw Yahweh's glory, "high and lifted up," he saw the glory of Jesus Christ. Just like Isaiah's message about the glory of Yahweh closed the eyes and hardened the hearts of those who heard him, so did the message of Jesus Christ harden and blind many to whom He spoke, resulting in their greater unbelief. How do the claims and preaching of Christ affect you? Do they blind your eyes harden your heart?

3. Some do not believe openly because they are cowards (vv. 42-43). Here we seem to have a category that is different from the unbelievers described in verse 37. These rulers saw in Jesus the Savior Isaiah said to expect. His message did not blind their eyes or harden their heart. They believe, but they do so secretly, and they do so secretly because they love man's praise more than God's praise. Their secret faith did little to help the unbelievers of verse 37. Imagine how much good they could have done had they openly confessed the Savior.

We can have little assurance that cowardly faith is true saving faith, rather than the false faith that John describes elsewhere in his Gospel (see v. 25). Rom. 10:10, "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Matt. 10:33, "But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven." What love do we find in our own hearts, a love for the glory of men or a love for the glory of God? Do you believe that Jesus is your Lord and Savior? If so, have you ever told anyone? Have you ever even told the Lord? Baptism is a confession of saving faith that gets a believer all wet but brings great glory to God.

Conclusion: And so, we have John's explanation for inexplicable unbelief. The Savior is not what unbelievers expect; the Savior's message blinds and hardens sinners who think that they know better; and confessing the Savior is about the glory of God, not the glory of men. What can possibly be done for the inexplicable unbelief of hardened unbelievers?

Only one thing can be done. We must pray for the miracle that changes unbelief into faith, that changed a Jerusalem that crucified the Savior into a Jerusalem with many thousands who believe. Isaiah prays such a prayer for the blind and hardened unbelievers of his day: "O Lord, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our heart from thy fear? Return for thy servants' sake, the tribes of thine inheritance" (63:17). Even in the face of tragic, inexplicable unbelief, we can pray for God's miracle of salvation. He has heard us, allowing us to believe. We have seen this miracle of salvation. And He will hear us again.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching