

## **“Jesus and Unbelief”**

*August 16, 2026*

John 12:37-50

### **I. Introduction**

In John 12 the Apostle John recorded the last days of Jesus’ public ministry. It was a progression—a rather sad progression. The first scene, about a week before Jesus’ crucifixion, was of Mary anointing Jesus at a dinner with some of Jesus’ closest followers and friends. The second scene, which was recorded in all four Gospels, was Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Here Jesus’ followers were joined by thousands of Passover pilgrims as they welcomed the Messiah to Jerusalem. John then skipped a day or two to the day when some Greeks—Gentiles—came to see Jesus. They wanted to have a personal meeting with Him. John didn’t record if they got to meet Jesus or not. But he did record a message which Jesus gave and the crowd surrounding Him heard. When Jesus finished, [John 12:34](#) says, **“The crowd spoke up, ‘We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up?’ Who is this Son of Man?’”** The crowd questioned whether Jesus was truly the Son of Man—the Messiah—or just another imposter. After all Jesus had done and said, many didn’t understand who He was.

I don’t know about you but there are a lot of things I don’t understand. For example, why do toasters have settings on them that will burn your toast so badly that no one in their right mind would eat it? If the professor on Gilligan’s Island could make a radio out of a coconut, then why couldn’t he fix the hole in the boat? If corn oil is made from corn and vegetable oil is made from vegetables, then what is baby oil made from? Why is it that when someone tells you there are millions of stars in the universe you believe them but if you see a sign that says, “Wet paint,” you have to touch it? Why is the man who invests all your money called a broker? Why is the slowest time for traffic called the rush hour? Why don’t you ever see the headline that says, “Psychic wins lottery?” And did you ever notice that if you blow into a dog’s face he gets upset but if you take him for a ride in the car the first thing he does is stick his head out the window? I just don’t understand.

Another thing I don't understand is how in spite of all the clear evidence that was presented to them, the nation of Israel would not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. In spite of all that they saw and heard, the Jewish people concluded that Jesus was not the Messiah and should be executed as an impostor. In this last section of John 12, John gave an explanation for this rejection of Jesus Christ, showing how it came about that, as he wrote in [John 1:11](#), **“He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”**

## II. Two Reasons for Unbelief

A. The first reason is **Blind Unbelief**. Writing years later, as John considered the people's response to Jesus, he was amazed at their blind unbelief. This amazement is seen in [verse 37](#) where he wrote, **“Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.”** In [John 7:46](#) some temple guards had said, **“No one ever spoke the way this man does.”** But the people neither heard nor understood Jesus' teachings from the Father. John was reminded of Isaiah's prophesy concerning the Messiah, as well as Isaiah's own ministry, as he quoted from [Isaiah 53:1](#): **“Who has believed our message?”** And even though they had seen Jesus' many miracles and healings, they refused to give God the glory. [Matthew 12:24](#) says, **“But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”** The Jewish leaders and the crowd closed their eyes to the truth and accepted lies. Isaiah had prophesied: **“To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”** Many saw Jesus' deeds, but few believed.

In the beginning of His ministry, Jesus explained this reaction in His conversation with Nicodemus, [turn to John 3:19-20](#). Paul added in [2 Corinthians 4:4](#), **“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”** The power of sin and the power of Satan must never be ignored or underestimated as they affect belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.

John gave two causes for Israel's blind unbelief, really anyone's unbelief—one human and the other divine. Together they illustrate the relationship between human responsibility and divine

sovereignty. In spite of all the clear evidence that was presented to them the nation of Israel would not believe. The **“arm of the Lord”** had been revealed to them in great power, yet they closed their eyes to the truth. They had heard the message; they had seen the miracles and yet would not believe. They chose unbelief. There is no neutral ground when God calls. Once Jesus appears and makes His claim, men must decide. Jesus said in [Matt. 12:30](#), **“Whoever is not with me is against me,”**

Israel’s rejection of Jesus was the result of years of rebellion, misused privileges, and rejecting divine truth. The terrible result was that when the truth came in the person of Jesus Christ, many chose not to believe. They would not believe. Thinking they could see, they were in reality spiritually blind. Speaking of the leadership, Jesus, in [Matthew 15:14](#), called them, **“Blind guides leading the blind.”** But, in His infinite grace and mercy, God has brought good out of Israel’s rejection. As [Romans 11:11](#) says, it was **“by Israel’s transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles.”**

In [verse 40](#) John quoted [Isaiah 6:10](#) to show divine sovereignty: **“He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn-- and I would heal them.”** When a person starts to resist the Light, i.e., Jesus Christ, something begins to change within him. If he continues to resist, he comes to the place where he cannot believe. Religious scholars call this *“judicial blindness.”* *“Judicial blindness”* is spiritual blindness that God permits to come over the eyes of people who do not take the truth seriously, i.e., it’s a decision by God to leave unbelievers in their unbelief, to leave them in the consequences of their refusal to come to God. God leaves unbelievers in their unbelief.

It is a serious thing to treat God’s truth lightly, for a person could well miss his last opportunity to be saved. It’s a sobering thought that those who persistently harden their hearts against God may find themselves hardened by Him. The record of God’s dealings with Pharaoh in [Exodus chapters 7-14](#) illustrates this principle; 10 times Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and 10 times God hardened his heart. [Turn to Romans 1:18-25.](#) Because of man’s continual rejection of God and His Word, God leaves

unbelievers in their unbelief; God gives them over. This is why Isaiah wrote in [Isaiah 55:6](#) **“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”**

This is important: God’s judicial hardening of men’s hearts doesn’t take away their guilt in refusing to believe in Jesus Christ. As one commentator put it, *“When John quotes ‘He has blinded their eyes . . .’ he does not mean that the blinding takes place without the will, or against the will of these people. . . . These men chose evil. It was their own deliberate choice, their own fault. Make no mistake about that.”* In other words, God is merely carrying out what they themselves have chosen. One reason for rejection of Jesus is blind unbelief.

**B. Fear of Men** A second reason for rejection is **Fear of Men**. There were those in leadership who would not believe, and there were those in leadership who would not openly confess Christ even though they had believed. They were afraid to confess Jesus. They were afraid to confess their faith because they did not wish to run the risk of being excommunicated from the synagogue. They were trying to carry out the impossible; they were trying to be secret disciples. They feared that by becoming confessing followers of Jesus they would lose so much. They wanted the best of both worlds.

Sadly, tragically, they loved their self-exalting religion and their prestigious position in the synagogue and the Sanhedrin so much that they refused to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. **“They loved human praise more than praise from God.”** Jesus said in [Matthew 16:26](#), **“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”** [James 4:4](#) says, **“You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”** Secret discipleship is a contradiction in terms for, *“either the secrecy kills the discipleship, or the discipleship kills the secret.”* In [Matthew 10:32-33](#) Jesus said, **“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.”**

But there is hope, initially Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea belonged to this group of secret disciples, but eventually they came out openly in the confession of Christ. In [John 19:38-39](#) it was Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who went to Pilate and asked to be allowed to take Jesus' body off the cross so that they could anoint it and then bury it. They were no longer "secret disciples." Their discipleship killed their secrecy.

### **III. A Final Plea for Belief**

John closed his record of Jesus' public ministry with a summary of the basic themes in Jesus' teachings and in the Gospel of John: God sent the Son; to see the Son means to see the Father; Jesus is the Light of the world; His words are the very words of God; faith in Him brings salvation; to reject Him is to face eternal judgment. Turn to the opening words of John's Gospel—[turn to John 1:1-5, 10-12.](#)

When Jesus said, **"As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them,"** the focus shifted from the blessings of belief to the consequences of unbelief. At His first coming, Jesus **"did not come to judge the world, but to save it."** Yet Jesus will judge unrepentant sinners in the future—[turn to Acts 17:30-31.](#) As Jesus said, **"There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day."** Those who reject the truth which Jesus taught condemn themselves; those who refuse His salvation will receive His judgment. As the writer of Hebrews warned in [Hebrews 12:25](#), **"See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?"**

Jesus' words determine people's eternal destinies, not only because of who He is but also because He speaks for His Father. Therefore, no one can reject His words without consequences. **"For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So, whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say."** Though He was fully equal to the Father, Jesus took on a submissive role during His incarnation—His time on earth. He spoke only the words the Father gave Him. These words are

unchangeable and absolute; as Jesus said in [Matthew 24:35](#): **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”** With these closing words, Jesus went away until His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Unbelief is rampant in the modern world. Today men and women and children love darkness just as they did in the Jesus’ day. If God honored the requests of Pharaoh, of Isaiah’s audience, and of Jesus’ audience by hardening their hearts, then He will honor the requests of those today who wish to remain in their unbelief. God still hardens hearts. [Hebrews 13:8](#) says, **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”** We need to pray that those we know will accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior before it is too late; before Jesus hides Himself from them.

Jesus’ closing words are also a warning to people today as well as those in His day. We are going to be judged by the Word of God. We will not be judged by our little good works. We will not be judged by what we think religion is—what “*my*” god is. We will be judged by God’s Word. Jesus came the first time as the Savior, as He said, **“I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.”** The next time though, He will come as the Judge. The voice from heaven that Peter, James, and John heard at Jesus’ transfiguration is just as important today as it was then: **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!”** ([Matthew 17:5](#))

There is a third thing we can learn from today’s Scripture. Discipleship is more than knowing Jesus’ words; as [John 12:47](#) implies, it is also a matter of “*keeping*” and “*doing*” what Jesus said. [Turn to James 2:14-19, 26.](#) Discipleship is knowing and doing God’s Word. Secret discipleship is no discipleship. What kind of disciple are you? Whose words do you obey? Who really is your master?