

## The Last Invitation

The Bible is full of invitations to come to God. Moses invited the people to choose between life and death and choose life. Joshua invited the people to choose whom they would serve. Jesus frequently called on people to come to Him, the living water, the Bread of Life, the Light of the world.

Christians have tried to capture this sense of God calling in our songs, our hymns, our poems, our stories. Sometimes we have done it well, sometimes badly. I think a bad example of an invitation is the 19th-century hymn “Have You Any Room For Jesus?”

Have you any room for Jesus,  
He who bore your load of sin?  
As He knocks and asks admission,  
Sinners, will you let Him in?

Refrain:

Room for Jesus, King of Glory!  
Hasten now His Word obey;  
Swing the heart’s door widely open,  
Bid Him enter while you may.

That invitation makes it sound as if Jesus is standing, hat-in-hand, begging us to open up and deign to let Him in. That’s not an accurate imagining of Christ’s invitation. C. S. Lewis does a better job in his book, *The Silver Chair*, one of the chronicles of Narnia.

Jill Pole, rasping with thirst, wants to drink from a stream, but Aslan the Lion sits on the opposite bank, watching her. She does not know Aslan yet, and is very nervous.)

“If you are thirsty, you may drink.”...

For a second she stared here and there, wondering who had spoken.

Then the voice said again, “If you are thirsty, come and drink,”...

She realised that it was the lion speaking. The voice was not like a man’s. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in rather a different way.

“Are you not thirsty?” said the Lion.

“I’m dying of thirst”, said Jill.

“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 daren’t 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.

That's much more like how Jesus invites us to Himself. There is no other stream. It is the Last Invitation of Jesus that we study here in John 12:37-50.

John wrote His Gospel in two parts. Part One is sometimes called the Book of Signs, from chapter one to the end of chapter twelve, we have Jesus presenting Himself to Israel as the Messiah, using plenty of signs and accompanying preaching to call them to Himself. John gave us seven signs that prove Jesus is the true Life and Light and Door and Shepherd and Bread, and Water. He is the Son of God and the chosen Saviour.

But the Book of Signs comes to an end at the end of chapter twelve, and chapter thirteen is the beginning of what is called the Book of Glory, where Jesus teaches His disciples the nature of the Christian life, and then goes to the Cross and rises from the dead. The first book is very evangelistic, preaching the gospel to those who do not believe, the second book is very much discipleship for those who do believe.

So here at the end of chapter twelve we have a great summary of Jesus' ministry to Israel. It is the summary of how Israel as the chosen nation responded to Jesus after three and a half years of ministry. And here, one more time, we have unbelief revealed and explained, and we have Jesus' final offer of Himself.

He is in Jerusalem, this is the last week of His life. He has entered the city triumphantly, and gone to the Temple to there teach and present Himself for examination one more time. Not only Jews, but Greeks have come to see Him and hear Him. So before He goes into the last evening of His life, where He will instruct His disciples, there is one more offer of Himself. The door is closing, the moment to accept is coming to an end, and Jesus one more time gives the gospel.

The Bible sometimes has these summary verses, or summary sections, where it compresses and distills truth into concentrated form. So we have here a great opportunity to do an X-Ray on what is really going on in unbelief. We see it in historical Israel, which helps us to identify it in ourselves. Likewise, we have the chance to see exactly what it is that we are to believe in the Gospel. So we can take this summary to give us two vital explanations: Why Some Do Not Believe, and Why You Must Believe.

## **I. Why Some Do Not Believe**

<sup>37</sup> But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, <sup>38</sup> 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?*" <sup>39</sup> Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: <sup>40</sup> "*He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest they should see with their eyes, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.*" <sup>41</sup> These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him. <sup>42</sup> Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; <sup>43</sup> for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. (John 12:37-43)

John tells us that majority Israel rejected Jesus as Messiah. We see this rejection in three ways: they did not believe (v37), they could not believe (39), they would not believe (42).

Verse 37 says they did not believe, in spite of so many miracles performed in front of them. The word in the original Greek translated *so many* can refer to quantity as well as quality. Not just the amount of miracles, but their spectacular and remarkable nature. Remember John writes at the great climax of this book: <sup>30</sup> And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of

God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30–31)

Some people claim they would believe in God, or believe in Christianity if they saw a sign, a miracle in front of them, some otherwise inexplicable appearance of supernatural power. But that is refuted by this passage. Many of these people saw in front of them, withered hands restored, lame people walking, blind eyes seeing, leprous skin restored. Many even saw a dead man restored to life. Jesus said in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus that closed, hard hearts will not believe even if someone rises from the dead and witnesses to them.

They *did* not believe. In fact, the verb tense here is negative imperfect active: "they kept on not believing on Him,". Stubborn rejection. John says this fulfilled Isaiah 53:1, "Lord who has believed our report, And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

But the next way John explains unbelief is more difficult to accept. Verse 39 says Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: <sup>40</sup> "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest they should see with their eyes, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them."

They *could* not believe. John tells us that Israel underwent a judgement from God that blinded their spiritual eyes and hardened their hearts so as to make belief impossible. Well, this is hard to understand. Would God prevent the very thing He is calling them to do? Would God stop you from being saved? The answer is no, not at first. God does not harden or blind someone out of spite, or random, arbitrary, capricious malevolence. God is not playing a game with Himself. No, in the Bible, God's blinding and hardening comes as both mercy and judgement. The mercy part is that sometimes God prevents people from receiving more revelation and so indicting themselves even further. It is merciful to blind them to light, so that they are not more guilty for rejecting more light. The judgement side is that God punishes hard hearts for their rejection. But this only comes when hearts have already rejected the light repeatedly. For example, in Exodus, the very first action of hardening the heart was Pharaoh, hardening his own heart. Only after he had rejected God's Word, did God give Pharaoh the resolve to continue in his rebellious path, and fulfill God's plan. As one person put it, God actually made Pharaoh more free, more free to follow his own inclinations and not be intimidated by the plagues falling on Egypt. Paul tells us in the future, those living during the Tribulation will be further hardened, because they initially rejected the truth.

<sup>10</sup> and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. <sup>11</sup> And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, <sup>12</sup> that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2:10–12)

In the same way, after Israel rejected the preaching and the miracles of Jesus, a judicial, judgement blindness came upon the nation. Paul tells us that it remains to this day.

<sup>14</sup> But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the *veil* is taken away in Christ. <sup>15</sup> But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. <sup>16</sup> Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:14–16)

In Romans 11:25, Paul says that "blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in."

This is a terrifying thing, but it shows the seriousness with which we should treat light when it is given to us. Spurgeon "It is an awful thing to resist the Spirit of God, for if his softening influences are withdrawn, the heart grows hard; if his enlightening influences are taken away, the eyes of the understanding are darkened. I do believe there are many who have so long trifled with conscience

and violated the best instincts of their nature that they are given up as those who are past hope. I pray God that it may not be so with any here; but it was so with many in the generation amongst which Christ laboured.”

But these two kinds of rejection, did not believe, and could not believe, are really explained by the third kind: they *would* not believe.

In verses 42 and 43, John explains that the rejection of Jesus was a chosen, wilful action.

<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; <sup>43</sup> for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Here John describes some almost-believers. People who were mentally persuaded, but not fully trusting in their hearts. They knew in their heads, but did not confess. Paul tells us both are needed for salvation.

that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. (Romans 10:9–10)

There was a cost to owning Christ publicly. You could be expelled from Israelite life, treated like a heathen, like a traitor, lose your standing, and privileges and social identity. And John says, for many of the rulers, that cost was too high. They wanted acceptance from man more than they wanted acceptance from God. They wanted to fit in with society more than to belong to God's people. Their love of glory from man was greater than their love of the glory of God.

Remember we saw back in 5:44: How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that *comes* from the only God? (John 5:44)

Indeed, that may still be the reason why many in do not consider Christ: the love of acceptance by man. And it is the root reason why anyone, Jew or Gentile refuses Christ: the love of man-pleasing over the love of God-pleasing.

They would not believe. Would not – the will, a choice. The heart weighs up: what do I want more? What do I desire more? Christ and lose my status? Or my status and not have Christ? That's why people don't believe. At the heart of unbelief is not evidence, reason, facts. They play a part, but a relatively small part. At the heart of unbelief is love: what you treasure the most. What you desire most. What you see as most valuable, most beautiful, most desirable. And where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Why did Israel reject Christ? They would not believe. As a result, they did not believe. As a result, they could not believe. Why do people today reject Christ? They will not receive Him, so they do not receive Him, until eventually they cannot receive Him.

Alexander MacLaren said: “Rejected light is the parent of the densest darkness, and the man who, having the light, does not trust it, piles around himself thick clouds of obscurity and gloom.”

But in the face of a rejecting nation, God still pleads with man. Their stubborn rejection is matched by a relentless Saviour. They have persistent unbelief but He is a persisting Redeemer. So here is the last public sermon of Jesus preached to Israel, a great summary of the gospel, and even of the

whole Gospel of John. It answers the question of why Israel should have believed in Him, and why you must believe.

## II. Why You Must Believe

<sup>44</sup> Then Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me. <sup>45</sup> And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me.

Jesus does not speak softly here, but cries out with the voice of the prophet. Jesus builds the case for faith in Him. The first reason He gives is **identity**. To believe in Jesus of Nazareth is not merely to place your faith in a human prophet. Jesus is in complete union with the One who sent Him, the Father. Faith in Jesus is faith in His Father. Faith in Jesus is faith in the true and living God. Faith in Jesus is trust in the Triune Creator.

The signs Jesus has done all testify to works that can only be done by God: creation, restoration, resurrection.

Jesus is not some optional extra to a vague deism or theism, where you admit there is a God, but you are unsure if Jesus is the way. Jesus went on to tell Philip "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9)

<sup>23</sup> He who hates Me hates My Father also. (John 15:23)

In fact, back in verse 41, John makes an astounding statement. He is quoting Isaiah 6, which has the reference to eyes blinded and hearts hardened. But you recall that Isaiah 6 is the famous vision of Isaiah seeing the Lord in His glory in the temple. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. (Isaiah 6:1) Recall the seraphim crying out, holy, holy, holy. Well look at who John says Isaiah saw on that throne.

"These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him." Isaiah saw on the throne the same one who is later named Jesus of Nazareth. Isaiah sees the Word of God the, Word of the Father, the second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Son on the throne.

This is who you are rejecting, if you reject Jesus. You are rejecting the Word, the image of the invisible God, the brightness of God's glory, and the express image of His person, the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

J C Ryle: "He meant, "He that sees Me sees not only Me, but through Me and by Me he sees Him that sent Me, for we cannot be divided."

Jesus keeps building the case for faith. Look at the next thing He says:

<sup>46</sup> I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness.

The first reason for faith is identity. The second one here is **visibility**. Jesus came as a light. A light is both visible itself and also produces visibility. You can see a light, but you can also see by a light, because of a light. Jesus was publicly visible, known, accessible. You could get to Him, see Him, hear Him, interview Him, debate with Him. Jesus is the most attested-to figure in all of human history. Jesus is by far the most well-known person who has ever lived. He is Light.

But Jesus, once accepted gives you light for life. Life makes sense in light of Him. Life's meaning, its purpose, its priorities, its goals, the way of living. "I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." —C. S. Lewis

Jesus offers this light. Five times in this Gospel, Jesus has called Himself, or is called the Light.

Light exposes what is in the darkness, and light dispels darkness. Spiritual and moral darkness is a life of lies and sinfulness. Jesus came publicly to bring conviction and exposure to sin, and lead people out of that darkness if they wish. But remember what He told Nicodemus?

<sup>19</sup> And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." (John 3:19–21)

Jesus said to the crowd then, and continues to say now: believe in Me because of My identity. Believe in Me because of my visibility. But look at one more way that Jesus proclaims the gospel and shows us why we must believe.

<sup>47</sup> And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. <sup>48</sup> He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him —the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. <sup>49</sup> For I have not spoken on My own *authority*; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. <sup>50</sup> And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak." (John 12:44–50)

We can summarise this paragraph with the word reliability. You should believe in Jesus because you have His recorded words, and His words are truth.

Jesus did come to bring judgement into the world, but here He reminds His listeners that judgement and condemnation were not His main purpose in coming the first time. So he says, if someone rejects Me right now, I am not going to condemn that man here and now. No, what will condemn the man is the Word that I have been preaching (48). That's because everything Jesus ever said was a message from the Father. God spoke His Word in and through Jesus. Jesus was both the Message and the Messenger. He is the Word. God's Words are everlasting life, and to reject them is to hate life and love death.

Jesus is inseparable from His Words. For many years there has been an academic project called the Search for the Historical Jesus. These liberal scholars get together and decide which words of Jesus were authentically spoken by Him, and which were not. And they end up with a very foreign historical character whom we hardly know because He said little of what we know.

No, Verse 48 tells us that to reject Jesus is to not receive His Words. The words of Jesus are not things He selfishly contrived. He was told what to say, and He said it. The source of his Words was heavenly, the result of these words is everlasting life, and the duration of these words stretches to the last day, because Jesus says they'll be used on the day of judgement to judge a man. Heavenly words, life-giving words, eternal words are true words. And if to receive Jesus is to receive His Words or to receive His words is to receive Jesus, then Jesus is saying, believe me because I am reliable. What I speak is truth. What I say can be trusted. What I teach will be enough to save or condemn you on the last day.

Reliability. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus has been teaching these three. He has been

explaining His true identity. He has been proclaiming His visibility and His power to give visibility. And He has been declaring His truthful, faithful reliability as the Sent One who speaks the Father's Words to mankind.

That's why we must believe in Jesus: His identity, his visibility, His reliability.

Exposure to truth, exposure to light, exposure to even signs is not enough to make you right with God. Being around the Bible, hearing preaching every week, agreeing with ideas, is not enough. George Whitefield was one of the great preachers in Christian history. Thousands upon thousands heard him preach and many came to Christ. One of Whitefield's closest friends was the famous Benjamin Franklin. They were friends for thirty-one years, and regularly corresponded with each other. Whitefield stayed in Franklin's home several times. During this time, Franklin was the primary publisher of all of Whitefield's sermons and journals. Forty-five times Whitefield's sermons were reprinted in Franklin's newspaper, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, and eight times the sermon filled the entire front page. Franklin published ten editions of Whitefield's journals and sold thousands of reprints of Whitefield's sermons. Franklin defended Whitefield from criticism. Despite their friendship and Whitefield's continued presentation of the gospel, Franklin never responded in faith. In his autobiography, Franklin wrote about Whitefield: "He used sometimes to pray for my conversion, but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard"

All that exposure, all that light, but no faith. He would not, and did not, and perhaps eventually could not. That happened to Benjamin Franklin. It happened to Israel. Tragically, it can happen today to any one of us. Instead, respond to the light today. See the identity of Jesus. See the visibility of Jesus. See the reliability of Jesus. Come to Him. Accept Him. Embrace Him. Trust Him.

Because there is no other stream.