

Unbelievable Unbelief

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Oliver Wendell Holmes has said that bigotry is like the pupil of the eye, the more light you pour into it the more it contracts. Webster's defined a bigot as "a person who is obstinately or intolerantly devoted to his or her own opinions and prejudices". Obstinate devotion to my own pre-judgements, my own opinions, my own views. That kind of attitude does not want more light, or more truth, because the facts might persuade it to change its mind. So it closes, shrinks away from more light, more truth, to obstinately hang on to its views.

Have you ever wondered why some people, with all the evidence in front of them for God's existence, for the historicity of the Christian faith, for the miraculous nature of the Bible, will still obstinately reject it? Perhaps you have wondered why the Jewish leaders did not accept Christ. Why did people who saw such miracles still remain in unbelief? Why did the leaders of first-century Judaism not accept the miracle-working Jesus when He was among them? This passage has the answer.

But it does more than answer an historical question. It answers the question of why people today don't believe. It exposes things in our own hearts. This passage searches us, and asks us, how do you respond when faced with accepting Christ as your Lord? What sort of things might you and I do to escape having the Lord Jesus rule us?

What we'll see is that unbelief is actually unbelievable. Unbelief is irrational, unbelief is incorrigible, its intractable, it's illogical. Unbelief is driven not by facts, but by fear, by something we want to protect, hold onto, hold out against.

But we'll also see that God is not outfoxed, checkmated or outflanked by this unbelief. The psalmist even says "Surely the wrath of man shall praise You" God uses and includes the moves of His enemies in His overall strategy.

So there are just two parts to this story. As we watch the Pharisaic response to the raising of Lazarus we'll see the selfish, fear-driven heart of unbelief. But then, we'll see something quite marvellous: we'll see God's sovereign power working through and around unbelief. It remains to us to see what is in our own hearts and decide which side we will be on.

I. The Self-Interest of Man That Aggravates His Unbelief

⁴⁵ Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did. ⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place

and nation.”

Perhaps the greatest miracle in the three-and-a-half-year ministry of Jesus has just been performed before the very eyes of a watching crowd. Lazarus has been raised from the dead. The watching crowd knew that Lazarus was dead – four days dead – and they saw Jesus call him to life, and watched the man stumble and shuffle out of the tomb in his grave-clothes. Some of the Judeans, people who lived in the area, saw the miracle, and believed that Jesus was truly Messiah, Son of God.

They responded positively, because signs and miracles sometimes have the effect of demonstrating the reality of God's existence, the nature of His character, and the trustworthiness of His Word.

We've seen this before in John. ²³ Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. (John 2:23)

³¹ And many of the people believed in Him, and said, “When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this *Man* has done?” (John 7:31)

But signs and wonders do not always convert. Some people want them for mere amusement. Some signs, like the ones at Mount Sinai, overwhelm and impress people, but do not necessarily convert them, or persuade them. In other words, you can see a sign, acknowledge it happened, but not be persuaded to accept its meaning.

That's what happens to several people who see the sign and, like tattle-tales in primary school, run off to tell the teacher – verse 46.

It was widely known, and verified in verse 57, that the Pharisees wanted Jesus arrested. So these people at the grave of Lazarus, who witnessed the raising of Lazarus, clearly are hostile to Jesus. They go and tell the Pharisees what Jesus did.

In response to that, some of the Pharisees and chief priests convene a special meeting. This was likely the meeting of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was like the Supreme Court of Israel, but it could make laws, enforce laws, and pass sentences. It was composed primarily of Sadducees: priests who were related somehow to the high priest. There were a minority of Pharisees who also sat on this council made up, we think, of seventy-one men, and presided over by the high priest. Some people think this was the actual trial of Jesus: He is here declared guilty in absentia, and it is on that Thursday night and early Friday morning that they arrest Him and read out the sentence.

They meet, and ask, “What shall we do?”, which can be translated, “What are we doing? What are we doing about the problem of Jesus?” The answer is: nothing. He is growing in popularity. And then, notice the full admission: *this man works many signs*. No ifs and buts, no dismissals, no excuses. This man Jesus is doing the miraculous, and He is doing it on a large scale.

Now watch the selfish fear manifest:

⁴⁸ If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.”

Again, an amazing admission. The miracles of Jesus tend to create and confirm belief in Him. If we let Him keep doing these miracles, more and more people will believe in Him. Why is that a bad thing? This is the result they foresee: “the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.” How or why would the Romans come and do this if there was widespread belief in Jesus? Well, we don't know exactly what they were thinking. Possibly two scenarios. One, they envisioned a mass uprising, a kind of revolt or revolution led by another messiah-claimant, and it would lead to Rome

crushing the nation for rebellion.

Two, they pictured mass belief in Jesus changing the very nature of Judaism, changing their favoured status with Rome. Roman emperors had made several laws tolerating Judaism, and the chief priests were collaborators and cooperators with Rome. But Judaism was tied strictly to the ethnicity of Jewish. A massive change to Judaism that now invited all people of all ethnicities would change Judaism. The messianic faith of Israel, would now become an international faith, the messianic faith of the world, anchored in Israel, in the Jewish Messiah, in the Jewish Scriptures. But such an international faith would be the end of their special status, and an end to their political positions. "Our place" may refer to the Temple, or the city, or possibly their actual positions as Sanhedrin. Our nation refers to the supposed destruction of all Israel.

However they envisioned it, they feared losing their position. The truth or falsity of Jesus didn't matter to them. The fact that Jesus was doing miracles didn't persuade them at all to consider if He might be the Messiah. In the end, it all came down to politics, retaining power, retaining positions.

Self-interest drove and aggravated unbelief. It blinded and prevented them from acknowledging Jesus.

A fear of losing independence may be one of the single biggest reasons for stubborn unbelief. Paul tells us that mankind knows God, but does not want to acknowledge Him as God or be thankful. Why? Because people sense correctly that if I believe in Him, and turn to Him, He will come in and take my place, and change the status quo. If I believe, God may come in and make demands on me, and I will no longer be independent, autonomous, sitting on the throne of my life.

In other words, the issue is not about evidence and reason, it's about politics. Who gets to rule my life? Who gets to control it, have the final say? Even if God is real, and Christ is His Son, and even if I've seen His miracles with my own eyes, if that means He comes in and takes my place, I won't allow it. From Adam through the Old and New Testament, man's problem with God has not been about God's existence; it's been about God's authority.

One of the shortest summaries of this in all of Scripture comes in one of Christ's parables about the ten servants who each received money to trade while the master went away. "But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We will not have this *man* to reign over us.'" (Luke 19:14)

That's actually what's going on when people say, I don't believe in God. It's what's going on when people say, there are just too many religions for me to decide. It's what's going on when people say, there are just too many scientific reasons to accept the Bible.

No, here's the question an honest person must answer: if God did exist, would you want Him to rule your life? If Jesus is the Son of God, would you want Him to come in and take your place and change the status quo?

A. W. Tozer said, "Unbelief will forever be present when there is an unwillingness to face and obey the truth."

We reject Jesus not because of a lack of evidence, but because we fear Him taking our place.

Confronting the fear that drives unbelief is one of the steps towards faith. Confronting this is asking whether self-rule or God-rule will be better for me? It is asking whether the lordship of Jesus would be better than self-rule. "For a day in Your courts *is* better than a thousand [elsewhere]. I would

rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness. (Psalm 84:10).

Now, in the middle of all this hard-hearted rejection, where is God? What does God do with this stubborn, independent, defiance? We see the amazing power and providence of God next.

II. The Sovereignty of God That Accomplishes His Will

⁴⁹ And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.” ⁵¹ Now this he did not say on his own *authority*; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.

Presiding over this Sanhedrin is Caiaphas, who was High Priest from the year 18 to 36. He is mentioned by name in the books of Matthew, Luke, John, and Acts, and is attested in the writings of Flavius Josephus. He is mentioned nine times in the New Testament.

When John writes that he was High Priest that year, he doesn't mean that High Priests were appointed annually. He means that Caiaphas was High Priest in that fateful year, the year of Christ's crucifixion.

Caiaphas says, with evident contempt, you know nothing. Josephus tells us the Sadducees were rude even to each other. You are wholly mistaken, nor have you calculated the practical mathematics of the situation. It is more profitable, more advantageous for everyone if one man should be executed, whether justly or unjustly, and the whole nation survive, rather than letting that one man live, and seeing the whole nation perish under Rome.

Here we have the official moment when Judaism broke away from the faith of the patriarchs. Here is where Judaism broke away from the Messianic Scriptures, the plan of God to have His kingdom on earth, and instead, for political reasons, headed in its own direction. Here the head of Jewish religion that year decides that Yeshua must be taken out. Messiah or not, miracle-worker or not, He must be removed.

Caiaphas means this cynically. One man must be executed by them to protect the nation. He must be sacrificed, because He is a threat. His life will bring about the destruction of the whole nation.

But in verse 51, John tells us that Caiaphas' words went far beyond what he meant. God would often speak through the High Priest. In the Old Testament, they carried the Urim and Thummim stones, and announced the will of God in matters of guidance. And here, John says that God was speaking through this evil High Priest, who had murderous intentions, to speak of the gospel itself. This is the glorious sovereignty of God moving silently and powerfully even among those in rejection.

Because within Caiaphas' words are another identical, parallel meaning: yes, one man must die to protect the nation. But not from Rome. One man must die to protect the nation from eternal judgement. He must die, not because He is a threat to the nation or guilty. He must die because He is the only one who can save them by His death. Either He dies, or they all die. Jesus would die for the nation so that the nation would not perish. “For the transgression of My people was He stricken” (Isa. 53:8).

“That one man die for the people” is a simple prophecy of the meaning of the cross. Note, it is a

substitutionary death – one man on the behalf of others. And John adds his commentary: this death would not only be for the Jewish nation, but for the children of God who were scattered abroad. This reminds us of when Jesus said, ¹⁶ And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock *and* one shepherd. (John 10:16)

There is some hint here of election and predestination: gathering the children of God who are scattered. If they're scattered, they're not yet children of God, but in another way, God knows they will be. It is like when Paul approached the unevangelised city of Corinth, God told him in a vision "I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:10) How could God have many people if they had not yet heard the gospel? The answer is that they would believe, meaning they are God's people by foreknowledge.

But the really striking thing to all of us is that this High Priest, in the very moment when he is announcing that Jesus should be assassinated, was simultaneously announcing the gospel. What does this tell us? God is sovereign and in control even when people rage against Him. When Balaam was hired to curse Israel, the only words that could come out of his mouth were blessings. When Pilate wrote an insulting title above the cross, he ended up writing exactly the truth: This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. When the chief priests hurled insults at Him, they spoke gospel truth: He saved others, but He cannot save Himself!

God is sovereignly in control in and through the rejection of man. Joseph could say to his brothers. ²⁰ But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. (Genesis 50:20)

⁴ The LORD has made all for Himself, Yes, even the wicked for the day of doom. (Proverbs 16:4)

You see, in God's universe, you don't get to decide if God will have His way. You only get to decide which role you will play. But whether you get into the role of adversary of God, or friend of God, God's sovereign will will take place through you. You will be the callous brothers that sell Joseph into Egypt, resulting in him becoming ruler, protecting Israel, and setting the stage for the Exodus. You will be the mocking voices whose insults are truths that will indict you. You will be the lawless hands that murder Jesus, putting Him on the cross that saves sinners. You can be a snapping dog, barking at your Creator. God will use it, tie you up and let you mow his grass with all your ranting and raving. You can be a loyal friend, enjoying your Creator.

Unbelief does not thwart God or harm God. It just positions you with respect to God. It determines what role you will play in the grand story God is writing. You can be a villain, or a hero. You can't change the Author or the Director of the story.

The great glory of God is that He uses His friends and His enemies. He uses those who use their freedom to turn to God, and He uses those whose their freedom to turn away from God.

So what did they then do? How did these two factors work together?

⁵³ Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death. ⁵⁴ Therefore Jesus no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there into the country near the wilderness, to a city called Ephraim, and there remained with His disciples. ⁵⁵ And the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went from the country up to Jerusalem before the Passover, to purify themselves. ⁵⁶ Then they sought Jesus, and spoke among themselves as they stood in the temple, "What do you think—that He will not come to the feast?" ⁵⁷ Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a command, that if anyone knew where He was, he should report *it*, that they might seize Him. (John 11:45–57)

From here, the Sanhedrin now make active plans to catch and kill Jesus. “[they] plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him. (Matthew 26:4)

A resurrected Lazarus would lead to a crucified Christ!

Jesus must have had sympathisers in the Sanhedrin for Him to have found out about this meeting, and indeed, for us to have a record of what was said in it. Likely, it was Nicodemus.

Jesus then made sure He was not walking in plain sight, but took refuge in a nearby city of Ephraim. But here was the problem. It was now the Passover again. This is the third Passover mentioned by John: the first was when Jesus cleansed the temple in chapter 2, the second was the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6, and now this is the third. Passover required men to come up to Jerusalem. So speculation among the people, and the rulers is rife. Will Jesus come up? Will He avoid it? He has to come up to obey the Law of Moses, but if He does come up, He is walking into a trap.

Verse 57 puts it plainly: Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a command, that if anyone knew where He was, he should report *it*, that they might seize Him.

But when it was the exact moment, the right time, God used the stubbornness unbelief of the Sanhedrin to put Jesus on the cross. Peter could look at the people in Jerusalem who had consented to the crucifixion of Jesus “Though he was delivered up according to God’s determined plan and foreknowledge, you used lawless people to nail him to a cross and kill him.”

Here we see the ways that sinful human nature seeks to sustain its unbelief. The Sanhedrin have decided that Jesus is a threat, regardless of whether He is messiah or not. Now, they have set up a system to eliminate Jesus, to make sure they get rid of him. That stubborn unbelief finds a way.

Now think of how the human heart does the same thing. In fact, the language Paul uses in Romans 1:18 is that people suppress the truth. People make sure the truth doesn't get out and confront them again. So we create ways of life that pretend God is not there, that we are not sinners, and that Jesus never really came. Large-scale systems that include our educational systems from pre-school through to adult education, our entertainment industry, our media and journalism, our political systems, our scientific establishment they all sustain unbelief. They eliminate God. They make sure you do not mention Him, refer to Him, pray to Him, expect Him, worship Him. We attack and despise religion.

And if you live in that system, God does some unreal, far away, mythical, harmless. But this unbelief is not some separate story God is writing. It is part of His story. Every story needs both its protagonists and antagonists, its heroes and villains, its good guys and bad guys. Unbelief becomes, by its own stubborn choice, the official opposition.

Remember Psalm 2?

¹ Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? ² The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, *saying*, ³ “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.” (Psalm 2:1–3)

The kings hate God and His Messiah because they fear His authority will take their place. They plot and scheme to prevent Him from doing so. There's the Self-Interest of Man That Aggravates His Unbelief .

But here comes the sovereignty of God that accomplishes His will.

⁴ He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The LORD shall hold them in derision. ⁵ Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: ⁶ "Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion." (Psalm 2:4–6)

God will triumph. He promises His Son, the Messiah: "⁸ Ask of Me, and I will give *You* The nations *for* Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth *for* Your possession. ⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.' " (Psalm 2:8–9)

So what does the Psalmist advise?

¹⁰ Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. ¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. ¹² Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish *in* the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed *are* all those who put their trust in Him. (Psalm 2:10–12)

In other words, believe in Him. Give Him His place as supreme. Do not fear that when Christ takes His place as Lord of your life that it will be an evil thing. It will only remove what should never have been there: a corrupt nature, a usurper trying to rule what belongs to God. Tozer said it well "Unbelief will destroy the best of us; faith will save the worst of us."