

A Theology of Unbelief
John 12:37-50
May 3rd, 2026

1. Isaiah _____ unbelief. (12:37-38)
2. Judicial _____ resulted in unbelief. (12:39-41)
3. _____ hindered open belief. (12:42-43)
4. Jesus urged people to _____. (12:44-50)

Questions for Discussion/Reflection on John 12:37-50

1. How does John 12:37 summarize the majority response to Jesus?
2. John quotes the prophet Isaiah to explain what is going on. Read Isaiah 52:13-53:3. How do these passages from Isaiah explain the people's reaction to Jesus?
3. How does Romans 11:25-31 explain the hardening that has happened to Israel?
4. How can fear keep someone from openly confessing Christ? (vv. 42-43) Does it seem that John describes it as true belief? Can you think of modern examples?
5. According to John 12:47, why did Jesus come to the world? How do we reconcile that with John 9:39?
6. What familiar refrains do you notice in John 12:44-50 that Jesus has repeated throughout the gospel of John? Why do you think He comes back again and again to these specific points?
7. During His incarnation, Jesus submits to the Father's will and initiative (vv. 49-50). What does that tell us broadly about the concepts of authority, submission, and equality? Why is that important to remember in other contexts of authority and submission, like marriage, parenting, church, etc.?

A Theology of Unbelief

John 12:37-50

May 3rd, 2026

Big idea: Unbelief fulfilled prophecies about the rejection of the Messiah and God's judicial hardening and yet Jesus still urged them to believe.

Intro

Jesus neared the end of His 3 years of public ministry. 3 years of teaching, reasoning from scripture, showing compassion, performing miracles, sinless living. And yet the great tragedy is that many, many, many of His own people – the Jewish people – did not believe.

John 1:11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

Why?

Some explanation must be given for such a large-scale, catastrophic unbelief. (Carson)

Did God fail? Should Jesus have been more persuasive? Were His arguments not clear enough? Were His miracles not public enough and verifiable enough?

On the contrary, John explains that this rejection was predicted by God and was even part of God's judicial hardening of the people.

And yet he also summarizes Jesus' urgent appeal for people to believe.

We once again encounter the interplay of God's sovereignty in salvation and man's responsibility.

I haven't heard this, but someone may feel like we have been talking a lot about God's sovereignty in salvation, His choice to draw people or harden people, as we go through John. My aim has been to talk about it exactly as much as John talks about it and in exactly the same way as John talks about it.

There is this tension in which God is sovereign and man is responsible. Perhaps more than any other book in the Bible, John doesn't let us move away from either of these two points, even if we can't fully understand in our limited human perspectives. John teaches what we would call compatibilism.

Compatibilism is the belief that human freedom and moral responsibility are compatible with theological determinism and a robust account of divine sovereignty.

We covered this at length and in depth in John 6. We have hit on it several other times since then as John continues to teach about why people do and don't believe. This is another key passage.

We need an accurate theology of unbelief.

We, on the other side of faith in Christ, know there is great joy in Christ. He came to give life and give it abundantly (10:10). He speaks things to us that His joy may be in us and our joy may be full (15:11). We want others to know Jesus, to believe in Jesus, to respond to Jesus. But what we believe about why they do/don't respond will affect our methods.

(Carson) If we don't know the answer to why people choose not to believe, then we'll constantly be asking the question, Will they believe if we do this? Can we convince them to believe if we try that? Our theology determines our methods.

Creative ideas –

Maybe we should give away a new car? People come to church and they reach under their chairs and if they have the golden ticket they get a new car!

Just heard about a church plant in Utah that gave away free Xboxes at their first Sunday

Maybe we need a celebrity to share their testimony?

Maybe we need a cooler set up and stage.

Maybe we need to downplay or remove parts of the Bible that are offensive.

1. Isaiah **predicted** unbelief. (12:37-38)
 - a. Even after all of these signs that demonstrated Jesus' power and identity, they were not believing in Him.
 - b. But rather than a surprise to God, this fulfilled the words of Isaiah.
 - i. He quotes 53:1
 - ii. **Isaiah 53:1** Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
 1. Isaiah predicted 700 years before Christ that He would come and most of the Jewish people would not believe in Him. God's servant, the Messiah, would be exalted, but He would also be rejected and marred (badly beaten and wounded).
 - iii. **Isaiah 53:3** He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
 1. Using past-tense language to describe something that hadn't happened yet, but it was from the perspective of the Jewish people realizing that they had missed their Messiah.
 - iv. Even human unbelief cannot escape from the all-embracing purposes of God. (quote adapted from Milne)
 - c. Paul explains the same thing in Romans 9-11 – I'm going to read and summarize this loaded section, hopefully to help you see how it explains what John is saying as he quotes Isaiah.
 - i. Read Romans 9:1-6
 1. Great sorrow and grief for his own people, the Jewish people.
 2. He recounts their spiritual privilege.
 3. But it's not that God's word has failed.
 - ii. Summarize
 1. 9:7-13 – God's choice extended and narrowed through Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob.
 2. 9:14-chapter 10 God has mercy on some and hardens others
 3. Romans 11:1-2a God hasn't rejected His people
 4. Romans 11:3-24 He goes on to describe how there is still a remnant, there are still some Jews who believe. But also Gentiles were grafted in, like branches onto a tree.
 - iii. Read Romans 11:25-29
 1. Partial hardening
 2. Until – not forever – the fullness of the Gentiles have come in
 3. For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable – God's divine choice of Israel and His covenant with them will be fulfilled.

- iv. Why the partial hardening? Why the rejection of 12:37? Because God's plan is bigger than just the Jewish people. He is drawing in all people, people from all nations, all languages, all cultures, all continents.

2. Judicial **hardening** resulted in unbelief. (12:39-41)

- a. For this reason, they *could not* believe.
- b. Why did they not believe?
 - i. The answer is multidimensional – there are many parts to it.
 - 1. People loved darkness rather than the light (John 3:19)
 - 2. They were unwilling (John 5:40) – there is a personal culpability
 - ii. He adds another reason here. It is a reason that is not new to scripture. In fact, He quotes from Isaiah again in support of it and the NT does in several other places as well.
 - 1. God has judicially hardened their hearts.
 - 2. Judicial = as an act of judgment.
- c. He quotes from Isaiah 6:10
 - i. **Isaiah 6:8-9** Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" ⁹ He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.'
 - ii. **Isaiah 6:10** "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim, Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed."
 - iii. In that context it appears that the Lord has intended to bring judgment after centuries of patient forbearance so He is divinely rendering their hearts unresponsive.
 - iv. He commissions Isaiah to go with this message but He tells him that the people will not listen. In fact, the preaching itself will evoke and in a sense cause the negative response – “render the hearts of this people insensitive.”
 - v. The same sun that softens the wax, hardens the clay.
- d. Notice this line in v. 41 – These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and spoke of Him.
 - i. Who is the “His”, who is the “Him”? Who did He see?
 - ii. John says Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus.
 - iii. Isaiah 6 is perhaps the most significant, most powerful, most visual description of the glory of God in the OT.
 - 1. In the year Uzziah died – Uzziah the king reigned for 52 years – we're on our 9th president in 52 years. But now he was dead and Isaiah saw a vision of a much greater king – the Lord.
 - 2. He was high and lofty, seated on a throne.
 - 3. His robe filled the temple.
 - 4. Angels flew while they covered their eyes because the sight was too magnificent and their feet because He was too holy. They are mere creatures and can't look directly at the Lord's blazing, holy glory.

5. They called out to one another, Holy, Holy, Holy. When we want to emphasize something in English we underline it, bold print, exclamation mark. Hebrew used repetition.
 6. The foundations trembled at the voice. Have you ever listened to music with the bass so loud and the speakers so large that your vehicle trembles? Maybe the car next to you at a stop light? The voice of this angel crying out God's holiness did that.
 7. What is Isaiah's response?
 - a. Woe is me – now “wow” – but woe. He recognizes His own sin. What else can we do before a holy God.
 - iv. That's the same Holy God who entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a baby donkey to a crowd waving palm branches, wearing simple clothes that would soon be divided among the soldiers, with hands that would soon be pierced, with a head that would soon have a crown, but of thorns.
 - v. And just as in Isaiah's day, so John quotes again and says these people are hardened.
 - e. Some points to consider to keep it in perspective
 - i. God's sovereignty is not set against human responsibility
 - ii. God's judicial hardening is not arbitrary
 1. Against guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen
 2. Similar to Romans 1:26 when God gives people over to their sinful desires.
3. ***Fear*** hindered open belief. (12:42-43)
- a. Nevertheless, many did believe.
 - i. It wasn't a complete hardening of everyone
 - b. However, some were hindered by fear.
 - i. They believed but were not open about it – they were not confessing Him.
 - ii. Why?
 1. They were afraid of the Pharisees; afraid they would be put out of the synagogue.
 2. It was their whole social and religious community. To be put out of the synagogue would be to lose connections, help, work, maybe even housing.
 - c. They were motivated by fear and love – but not the right kind of love.
 - i. It was the love of approval by other people.
 - ii. They loved the approval of people rather than the approval of God.
 - iii. Don't we all have to make that choice in some way?
 1. Will I live for the approval of my friends, coworkers, family, society, social media? Or will I live for the approval of an audience of One – God?
 - d. John later names two men in this category – Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.
 - i. **John 19:38-39** After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate

granted permission. So he came and took away His body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, ...

- ii. Fear hindered them, at least for a while, but the fact that they are publicly named in this gospel record that was circulated is a good indication that they didn't not stay in secret.
- iii. There may be a true disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, who hasn't yet told his LDS parents, or her Muslim roommates, or partying friends – but it doesn't seem like the Lord would allow them to remain in that tension long term.
- iv. If you're a Christian and a student – what would keep you from opening your Bible and reading it in class when your work is done? What would keep you from carrying your Bible where others could see it?
 1. We don't want to be performative where we do something for the appearance.
 2. But if there is a sense of embarrassment or fear of what someone would think of you, that is the same type of thing that John is putting a finger on here.

4. Jesus urged people to **believe**. (12:44-50)

- a. Lest someone conclude, “Since it is up to God’s sovereignty, people are not responsible and there is no sense in urging people to believe,” John immediately follows up with a summarizing paragraph that hits the highlights of Jesus’ talking points throughout the book of John. It features a powerful call to believe.
- b. Here at the end of His public ministry, it serves as a montage of His greatest hits – the key talking points that have marked His message.
- c. He is sent by the Father (v. 44)
 - i. **John 4:34** Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.
- d. To see Him is to see the Father (v. 45) – Remember, Isaiah saw His (Jesus) glory
- e. He has come as light into the world (v. 46)
 - i. 1:4 – in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men
 - ii. 3:19 – light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light
 - iii. **Joh 8:12** Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”
- f. He didn't come to judge but the word He spoke will judge them
 - i. “Dangerous rapids ahead” sign on the Salmon River before the whitewater section – if someone is warned and chooses to proceed anyways, they are “judged” by the message if they flip their boat.
- g. In His incarnation, the Son submits to the Father, without diminishing His status.

5. Conclusion

- a. A theology of unbelief helps us understand why there is rejection of the gospel even with clear evidence.
- b. A theology of unbelief does not “get us off the hook”
 - i. No one is in a position of saying, “I want to believe but God won't let me.”

- ii. The Bible never says people missed heaven because they wanted Jesus but weren't chosen...it says they did not repent and believe.
- c. What should our "methods" be?
 - i. Preach the gospel because it's the power of God for salvation.
 - ii. Love people well.
 - iii. Pray for them.
 - iv. Trust God to open blind eyes and soften hard hearts.

A THEOLOGY OF UNBELIEF

John 12:37-50

1. Isaiah *predicted* unbelief. (12:37-38)

Isaiah 53:1 Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

Romans 9:1-6
Romans 11:25-29

2. Judicial *hardening*
resulted in unbelief.
(12:39-41)

Isaiah 6:1-5 In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

Isaiah 6:1-5² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

Isaiah 6:1-5 ³ And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory."

Isaiah 6:1-5 ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

Isaiah 6:1-5 ⁵ Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

3. Fear hindered open belief. (12:42-43)

John 19:38-39 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, **being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews,** asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came...

4. Jesus urged people to *believe*. (12:44-50)