NO ONE WHO BELIEVES IN ME SHOULD STAY IN DARKNESS

John 12:37–50

Key Verse: 12:46

“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.”

This passage contains the last words of Jesus spoken to the Jews. He summarizes what he’s been saying all along during his public ministry. The Father had sent him. He had come as a light. He had come to save, not to judge. His words were always God’s words. The point of all this was to believe in him. In this passage the author explains the nature of unbelief. We want to think about what it means to “stay in darkness,” and why anyone would want to do that. Most of all, we want to delve more deeply into the heart of Jesus, who cried out to the people rejecting him. May God speak to us through his living words today.

Read verse 37. This is John’s conclusion statement about the Jews of Jerusalem. Jesus had performed so many, and such great signs, and he’d done them all *in their very presence*. But they “would not” believe in him. In Greek the verb tense literally translates as “they kept on not believing in him.” These people were stubborn; their minds and hearts were closed to the truth. In light of all the evidence of what Jesus had actually done, the Jews were prejudiced against him. They didn’t like Jesus because he was known as a carpenter’s son from Galilee. They found it revolting to have such a person as their national leader, regardless of what he did. Jesus later tells his disciples that the Jews hated both him and his Father, and that they hated him “without reason” (15:24–25). Such a response to Jesus is still going on, among all kinds of people around the world. Many refuse to believe in Jesus. Frankly, many hate Jesus, without any reason. Historically, many have thought of faith as something inherently opposed to reason. They have said that if we believe in Jesus, we have to give up being rational. But actually, in light of verse 37, it’s unbelief that’s irrational.

To John, the Jews’ unbelief was so hard to understand and accept. But he found the answer in Scripture. Read verse 38. The prophet Isaiah found the same kind of irrational, unbelieving response among the people of his day. What did Isaiah mean by “our message”? In light of the rest of Isaiah 53, it seems to refer to the message about God’s suffering servant, the Messiah. God’s message that the Messiah would be a suffering servant was not what people wanted to hear. They wanted a leader who would be strong, powerful and glorious, not despised, rejected, and focused on wounded people. They wanted someone who would end up in victory, not defeat. But in Isaiah’s message about the suffering servant, “the arm of the Lord” is “revealed.” This expression refers to God’s power to save. Through Jesus’ humility, suffering and death, God would reveal his mighty arm, his power to save helpless sinners. The meaning of our message is revealed to those who believe it, but sadly, most people refuse to believe.

Read verses 39–40. This is another prophecy of Isaiah, loosely quoted. God told Isaiah in 6:10, “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull, and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.’” It seems that the more the people were told God’s message, the more they rejected it. God was, in a sense, frustrated with his people. He longed for them to repent and be healed, but their persistent unbelief made it impossible. In Isaiah 6:10, God actually told the prophet Isaiah to make their hearts calloused. In John 12:40, it is God himself who hardens them.

This is what happened to Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. When Moses performed a mighty miracle of God and proclaimed God’s message, Pharaoh rejected it. Each time he rejected God's word, Pharaoh became a little more hardened. Of course he was responsible for his rejection. But ultimately, God was sovereign even over Pharaoh, and God actually hardened his heart. Through hardening Pharaoh’s heart, God gained glory for himself, revealing his power to save his people (Ex4:21; 7:3; 8:15,32; 9:12,34; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8,17; cf. Ro9:17–18). In the same way, the Jews’ stubborn unbelief was under God’s sovereign rule. God used even their stubborn unbelief to gain glory for himself. God would use their stubborn unbelief and rejection of Jesus to send his Son to the cross and reveal his way of salvation for all people.

We learn some important lessons here. First of all, we learn that God is sovereign over opening or closing people’s hearts to his message. It’s only by his mercy that he opens anyone’s heart at all. Secondly, God uses even people’s rejection of Jesus for his own good purpose. Human beings’ rejection of God’s message never thwarts God’s purposes. Finally, we learn here that each time God’s light is given to us—even a small amount—we need to accept it. If we don’t, our hearts will become a little more hardened. So Jesus warned in verse 35, “Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you.”

Look at verse 41. John clearly says that in his prophecy Isaiah was speaking about Jesus and his glory. As we’ve seen earlier, Jesus’ glory is quite different from human glory. Jesus’ glory wasn’t human praise or admiration, but rejection and crucifixion. So, instead of being ashamed or discouraged because of rejection and the cross, we too, like Isaiah, need to see Jesus’ glory.

John also tells us that the Jews’ rejection of Jesus wasn’t unanimous. Read verses 42–43. Even some of the leaders believed in Jesus. Jesus' words and miracles moved their hearts, and they knew he was the Messiah. Their problem was that they didn’t want to lose anything. They wanted to maintain their own security and honor and keep enjoying people’s praises. Many today still fail to take Jesus’ side for this same reason. Jesus repeatedly warned us not to be ashamed of him before the world (Mt10:32; Mk8:38; Lk9:26; 12:8). We need to publicly stand on Jesus’ side and profess our faith, no matter what it may cost. When we do, God is pleased, we are saved, and others may be blessed (1Ti6:12–13; Ro10:10; Heb13:15).

Look at verse 44a. It says that Jesus “cried out.” He knew the Jews were rejecting him. They were being so unreasonable, stubborn and selfish to the end. Many people would have just walked away from them. But Jesus didn’t give up; he tried again, one last time. He gave his whole heart to sharing God’s message with such difficult people. What a broken heart Jesus had, even to cry out!

What did he say? Read verses 44–45. John’s Gospel repeats over and over again that the Father sent Jesus. Jesus didn’t come on his own, with his own idea or ambition. His ministry wasn’t for his own glory. He didn’t try to reveal himself; he revealed God. How did Jesus reveal God practically? Jesus spoke only the words of God (3:34). Jesus found his greatest satisfaction in doing the will of God (4:34). Jesus always sought to please God (5:30). And Jesus did the works that God sent him to do (5:36). In ministry we have a lot to learn from Jesus. His works undeniably and unmistakably revealed God. Through the works Jesus did, anyone can see that the Father was in Jesus, and that Jesus was in the Father (10:38). Later, Jesus would tell his disciple Philip, “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves” (14:11). Jesus’ life on earth revealed that he was in closest relationship with the Father; so when we look at Jesus, we can actually see God (1:18). In fact, there’s no other way to really see him (14:6).

Jesus went on to tell them why he came. Read verse 46. The light of Jesus has consistently been proclaimed throughout John’s Gospel (1:4–5,7–9; 3:19–21; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9–10; 12:35–36). Our world is still a very dark place. People can be so evil, hiding what they’re really up to. People are living in spiritual ignorance and in so many misunderstandings. But the light of Jesus overcomes the darkness. The light of Jesus can help anyone, no matter who he or she may be. Because of Jesus’ light, every human being, no matter how dark they may be, has hope. Through Jesus’ light, both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman came out of their darkness. Through Jesus’ light, the man born blind, with the most fatalistic life problem, began to see, both physically and spiritually. But sadly, even though Jesus came and shone his light, and he really didn’t want people to stay in darkness, many still chose to do so. Many still do.

Why do people choose to stay in darkness? It’s because they love darkness. It means they love sin. Jesus’ light exposes the darkness of sin, and people hate that, because they love sin so much. They don’t want to have to stop sinning, even though it’s ruining their lives. Another reason people choose to stay in darkness is because they’re comfortable there. They’ve lived there all their lives. Everything’s familiar and secure. It’s uncomfortable to come into the light, with everything exposed. It’s also unsure where the light will take them. Mostly, it seems that many people choose to stay in darkness because they’ve despaired. They think there’s no hope for them, so it seems useless even to try.

In the movie *Titanic*, at the end, there’s a very moving scene. When the ship has sunk, there are thousands of bodies floating in the water. It’s so dark and cold. And there’s a rescue boat with a light, floating through the bodies and calling out to see if any of those people are still alive. It seems just a few of them are, but they’re soon going to die. Rose, the star of the movie, is one of them. She can barely hear the boat and faintly see its light. And she has to decide either to make herself known to the rescue boat or to remain in the freezing ocean water and just perish there. At this point, she’s just lost everything she had in her life, even a reason to live. But she decides to start blowing on a whistle given to her by her friend Jack. And with the light on the boat, she’s found and rescued and goes on to live a full, long life. In the same way, Jesus came into this dark world with his light, on a search and rescue mission. Though we may have no more strength or hope, he’s still searching for us, and with his light he can find us and pull us out of even the blackest darkness. All we have to do is respond, to reach out and take his loving hand. That's what faith is.

But how can we believe? In verses 47–50 Jesus mainly talks about his words. We need to take hold of his words. Jesus’ words are exactly what God the Father told him to say. He doesn’t judge us; no matter how much we’ve sinned or failed, he’s still giving us his words, and he really wants to save us through his words. We need to hear his words, accept and keep them. If we don’t, in the end, those very same words will condemn us.

So in this passage we’ve mainly seen the heart of Jesus. He came into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in him should stay in darkness. Though we’re so stubborn and unbelieving, he’s still calling out to us through his words, to help us believe and come out of our darkness. May God help us make a small decision to receive the light of Jesus, which can deliver us from any kind of darkness. May God help us also to learn the heart of Jesus, who pleaded so earnestly with those who were rejecting him.