

THE PEOPLE COULD NOT BELIEVE

Jewish national unbelief

JOHN 12: 37-50

In his book *The Magician's Nephew*, C. S. Lewis writes of the creation of fictitious Narnia through the **song of Aslan** (the lion who represents Jesus in the book). The **Creation Song** is clearly intended to reveal the majesty and glory of Aslan. It is a grand call to worship

But there was one (**Uncle Andrew**) who would not hear it. The consequences were staggering:

“When the great moment came and the Beasts spoke, he missed the whole point, for a rather interesting reason. When the Lion had first begun singing, long ago when it was still quite dark, he had realized that the noise was a song. And he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a **lion** (*‘only a lion,’* as he said to himself) he tried his hardest to make himself believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing—only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world. Of course it can't really have been singing, he thought. I must have imagined it. I've been letting my nerves get out of order. Who ever heard of a lion singing? And the longer and more beautifully the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to. And when at last the Lion spoke and said, *‘Narnia awake,’* he didn't hear any words: he heard only a snarl. And when the beasts spoke in answer, he heard only barkings, growlings, bayings, and howlings.¹”

You may be wondering what the point is of this story. I believe you will find the answer as we study this morning in John 12:37-50.

¹ “(Collier), pp. 125-126; submitted by Eugene A. Maddox; Interlachen, Florida,” in *More Perfect Illustrations: For Every Topic and Occasion*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "U". Citation: C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (Collier), pp. 125-126; submitted by Eugene A. Maddox; Interlachen, Florida. Bold type and underlines added.

John 12:37-50 (NLT)

³⁷ But despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in him.

³⁸ This is exactly what **Isaiah** the prophet had predicted: “Lord, who has believed our message? To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm?”

³⁹ But **the people couldn’t believe**, for as Isaiah also said,

⁴⁰ “The Lord has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts— so that their eyes cannot see, and their hearts cannot understand, and **they cannot turn to me and have me heal them.**”

⁴¹ Isaiah was referring to **Jesus** when he said this, because he saw the future and spoke of the Messiah’s glory.

⁴² Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn’t admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. ⁴³ **For they loved human praise more than the praise of God.**

⁴⁴ Jesus shouted to the crowds, “If you trust me, you are trusting not only me, but also God who sent me.”

⁴⁵ For when you see me, you are seeing the one who sent me.

⁴⁶ I have come as a **light** to shine in this **dark world**, so that all who put their trust in me will no longer remain in the dark.

⁴⁷ I will not judge those who hear me but don’t obey me, for I have come to save the world and not to judge it.

⁴⁸ But all who reject me and my message will be judged on the day of judgment by the truth I have spoken.

⁴⁹ I don’t speak on my own authority. The Father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to say it.

⁵⁰ And I know his commands lead to eternal life; so I say whatever the Father tells me to say.”

Before we begin dissecting this passage beginning with verse 37, we would like to review the two previous verses, John 12:35-36 NAS:

³⁵ So Jesus said to them, “For a little while longer the **Light** is among you. Walk while you have the **Light**, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes.

³⁶ “While you have the **Light**, believe in the **Light**, so that you may become **sons of Light**.” These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them.

These verses serve as a **warning** to the people not to let the opportunity for salvation pass by. Beginning in verse 37, John begins to advise us as to **why** the Jews would not accept the truth about Jesus' identity.

In spite of all the irrefutable evidence that Jesus had presented they would not believe in Him. They stubbornly and foolishly refused to follow the Light.

Consequently verses 39 and 40 tell us:

“But the people couldn’t believe, for as Isaiah also said, “The Lord has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts— so that their eyes cannot see, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and have me heal them.”

The Jews' national unbelief had been predicted by **Isaiah** the prophet. The clearest Old Testament passage concerning the suffering Servant is told in Isaiah 53:1-12 which begins by stating that Israel would not accept God's message as taught by His Servant, Jesus. Listen to what God said to Isaiah in Isaiah 6:9-10 NLT:

8 Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?” I said, “Here I am. Send me.” 9 And he said, “Yes, go, and say to this people, ‘Listen carefully, but do not understand. Watch closely, but learn nothing.’ 10 Harden the hearts of these people. Plug their ears and shut their eyes. That way, they will not see with their eyes, nor hear with their ears, nor understand with their hearts and turn to me for healing.”

That is the message God told Isaiah to give to the people of His time, which was almost 700 years before Christ was born. Then here in John 12:39 and 40 Jesus gives the people of His time the exact same message. Things certainly did not change much in 700 years, did they? And do you know what? If Jesus were to come back today, He would repeat the exact same message to the people of our time, almost 2,000 years later, and they would give the exact same response. What does that tell you about mankind?

Then if we go forward to Isaiah chapters 52 and 53 we see this incredible description of Jesus who would not come to earth for another 700 years. Let us take a look at what Isaiah predicted:

Isaiah 52:13—53:12 NLT

¹³ *See, my servant (Jesus)² will prosper; he will be highly exalted.*

¹⁴ *But many were amazed when they saw him. His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would scarcely*

² Parentheses added.

know he was a man.

¹⁵

And he will startle many nations. Kings will stand speechless in his presence. For they will see what they had not been told; they will understand what they had not heard about.

¹

Who has believed our message? To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm?³

²

My servant grew up in the Lord's presence like a tender green shoot, like a root in dry ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him.

³

He was despised and rejected— a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care.

⁴

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins!

⁵

But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.

⁶

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

⁷

He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth.

⁸

Unjustly condemned, he was led away. No one cared that he died without descendants, that his life was cut short in midstream. But he was struck down for the rebellion of my people.

⁹

He had done no wrong and had never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man's grave.

¹⁰

But it was the Lord's good plan to crush him and cause him grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have many descendants. He will enjoy a long life, and the Lord's good plan will prosper in his hands.

¹¹

When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of his experience, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins.

¹²

I will give him the honors of a victorious soldier, because he exposed himself to death. He was counted among the rebels. He bore the sins of many and interceded for rebels.

Please think about this carefully. In the passages we just read Isaiah detailed what the

³ See John 12:38.

coming Messiah would be like, what would happen to Him, and what it would all mean. We believe God had Isaiah do this so that the people would know exactly what was going to happen at some time in the future and they could know that their salvation had come in the form of Jesus Christ. So the Jews, from the time of Isaiah to the time of Jesus' birth, generation after generation had been given the opportunity to study their Bibles and thereby be able to recognize their Messiah when He came. Yet when He came, what did they do? They rejected both Him and His message from God again and again and again and finally they killed Him. How stupid human beings can be! They are willing to give up an eternity which holds rewards beyond their fondest dreams in order to have their own way. This kind of attitude adds a whole new dimension to **insanity**.

In his vision Isaiah saw "*the Lord Almighty*" (Isaiah 6:1,3). John wrote that the glory Isaiah saw was **Jesus** (John 12:41). Do you know what that means? **Jesus is God!** And that is not the only place in Scripture that we are told this. We saw earlier in John 1:18 NLT: "*No one has ever seen God. But the one and only Son is himself God and is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.*"⁴ Many of Isaiah's prophecies predicted the coming Messiah, Jesus.⁵ For example:

Isaiah 7:14 NLT:

*All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him **Immanuel** (which means '**God is with us**').*

Earlier in John 5:46 Jesus had said that even Moses had written about Him.

Because they constantly rejected God's revelation, God had punished the Jewish people with judicial blindness and *hardened their hearts*.⁶ People in Jesus' day, like those in Isaiah's day, refused to believe. They "would not believe" according to John 12:37; therefore verse 9 tells us **they could not believe**. We can find a number of passages in the Bible where God punishes those who repeatedly reject His truth over and over and over again.⁷

John 12:40, which quotes Isaiah 6:10, states that God blinds the eyes and hardens the hearts of those who persist in rejecting Christ. This prophecy from Isaiah 6:10 is found seven times in the Bible.⁸ It is repeated many times because it is a serious warning to unbelievers who do not take very seriously the condition of their eternal souls.

Now these passages are troublesome to some people who ask, "*Does God decide that some people will not hear and understand the message? Does God deliberately harden some hearts so they will not believe because they cannot?*" Some theologians have indeed decided that is the case. They teach that God determined that some people will be

⁴ Also see John 10:30; 20:28; Col. 2:9.

⁵ Isa. 4:2; 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-5, 10; 32:1; 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-3.

⁶ John 12:40; Isaiah 6:10.

⁷ Exodus 9:12; Romans 1:24, 26, 28; 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12.

⁸ Isa. 6:10; Matt. 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26; and Rom. 11:8.

saved and others will not. But that idea is not consistent with other things we read in the Bible, such as 2 Peter 3:9:

2 Peter 3:9 ESV

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Or John 3:16 NLT

For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

That is why we believe these other passages are saying that some people hear and see, but do not believe, or perhaps more accurately refuse to believe. These **people at some point have crossed a line where their hearts have become so hard it is now impossible for them to believe.**

Proverbs 29:1 ESV

He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.

People harden their own hearts by constant rejection of God and Christ.

For instance, **Bertrand Russell** was a great scholar who was born in 1872 and died in 1970. He is remembered for being a philosopher and writer who dealt a lot with mathematical theory. Bertrand was born into a Christian home and had been taught the Bible and to believe in God. But he rejected his training and all the calls of the Gospel. In adulthood Russell became an outspoken atheist. Much of his writing seeks to undermine and ridicule faith in God. Someone has said that looking at a picture of him in his later years was a sad experience. The writer said that although Bertrand Russell's face reflected courage, it was grim and showed no sign of joy or hope. His daughter, **Katherine Tait**, reportedly said of him, "Somewhere at the bottom of his heart, in the depths of his soul, there was an empty space that once had been filled by God, and he never found anything else to put in it." Such was the result of Bertrand Russell's rejection of God and hardening of his own heart.⁹

John tells us in verse 36, *While you have the Light, believe in the Light* (John 12:36 NLT). And Isaiah tells us in Isaiah 55:6 NLT, "Seek the Lord while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near"

Light as we have seen over and over again in the last few chapters represents salvation

⁹ Adapted and expanded from *Elbourne's Sermon Illustrations*. <http://elbourne.org/sermons/index.mv?>

and righteousness as well as a number of other virtues. Darkness has been described in a variety of ways so far in John, and this would be a good time to remember what darkness represents.

John 1:5 (NAS):

⁵ *The Light shines in the **darkness**, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*

Here we see peoples' minds being blinded by Satan. They are not willing to see the truth.

John 3:18-21 NAS:

¹⁸ *"He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

¹⁹ *"This is the **judgment**, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the **darkness** rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.*

²⁰ *"For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.*

²¹ *"But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."*

John 12:42-43 NLT:

42 Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn't admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. 43 For they loved human praise more than the praise of God.

There were undoubtedly a number of people who believed in Jesus. Some may have held high-ranking offices among the Jews. But because they were afraid of being excommunicated from their synagogue they were in fear of openly confessing their faith (verse 42). They were afraid of what people would think of them if they confessed faith in Jesus. They were more concerned with the praise of men than the praise of God.

People **refuse** to come to Christ for a number of reasons, some of them pretty stupid. Let us return to our opening illustration about **Aslan** and **Uncle Andrew**, regarding how Uncle Andrew did not hear Aslan's song: "*Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to.*" Later in the book Aslan says of Uncle Andrew: "*This world is bursting with life . . . because the song with which I called it into life still hangs in the air . . . But I cannot tell that to this old sinner, and I cannot comfort him either; he has made himself unable to hear my voice. If I spoke to him, he would hear only growlings and roarings.*"¹⁰

If people are not willing to come into the Light, God allows them to remain in darkness and Christ will remain distant from them. He will not force them into accepting Him. It is

¹⁰ Lewis, C. S. *The Magician's Nephew*. Harper Collins. P. 185.

strictly their choice. And now the final blow.

John 12:44-46 NAS:

44 And *Jesus* cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. 45 "He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me."

⁴⁶ "I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness."

This represents eternal darkness. To "remain" in darkness means to live in Hell forever. Better to fear God and go to Heaven than to fear men and go to Hell!¹¹

Verse 45, "He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me," is underscored in Colossians 1:15 NLT:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation.

These verses make it clear that to believe in Jesus means to believe in God and vice versa. This does not mean by the way that people believe in two different Gods. When a person sees Jesus, they see the Father who sent Him to lead them out of Satan's kingdom of **darkness** into God's kingdom of love and **light**.¹² Jesus is the visible manifestation of God, whom we cannot see.

In verses 42–50, John simply repeats what Jesus is saying and why so many people reject the Light. Some reject Jesus because they are afraid of what other people will say if they openly declare Jesus to be their Savior (verses 42–43). If we turn to Revelation 21:8, guess who is at the top of the list of those who are going to Hell? "*But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death*" (KJV) The fearful unbelievers are the first to appear on the list.

The underlying issue here is the command of **God the Father**. To obey the Father means to be given eternal life. To reject the Father's Word is to reject the same Word that Jesus has given them and the result is death and Hell. AS was mentioned earlier, Moses also predicted the coming of Jesus who would speak for God. Moses said, "You must listen to Him" (Deuteronomy 18:15). In John 12:48, Jesus states that rejecting the Word of God leads to condemnation:¹³ "*He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.*"

¹¹ Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Jn 12:37.

¹² John 1:4, 9; 8:12; 12:35; Col. 1:13-14.

¹³ Deut. 18:18-19; John 3:18, 36; 5:24.

Jesus said He came **to save**, not **to judge**. But rejection of God's Word ultimately brings a hardening of sin and thus God's judgment. In the words of Moses, "*these instructions are not MT words—they are your life*" (Deuteronomy 32:47 NLT).

This simply means that those who reject the Light, Jesus Christ, will be sent to Hell forever. This could well be their last chance. Jesus repeated again what He had been telling them for months. Jesus would not speak to the crowds again. Now we do not want to repeat the obvious more than necessary, but let us just summarize Jesus' message in a few words:

- *"I have come to reveal the Father. When you look at Me and when you listen to Me, you are seeing and hearing the Father."*
- *"If you believe in the Father, you will believe in Me. If you do not believe in Me, you do not believe in the Father."*
- *"Whoever believes in Me will no longer walk in darkness, but will have come into the light, and will be given salvation and eternal life."*

- *"If you reject Me, you reject the promise of eternal life in Heaven from the Father and you will place yourself under eternal judgment in Hell forever."*

John 5:24 NAS:

²⁴ *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."*

Salvation comes through the Word and the very Bible that people reject today will be prima facie evidence that will be presented against them at their judgment. John teaches us that the Light will not shine forever. At some time during the Last Days the Light will hide Himself from the people of the earth and what a dark day that will be for those who are still alive at that time. If you are an unbeliever, we pray you will take a lesson from Proverbs.

Proverbs 1:20-33 NLT:

²⁰ *Wisdom shouts in the streets. She cries out in the public square.*

²¹ *She calls to the crowds along the main street, to those gathered in front of the city gate:*

²² *"How long, you simpletons, will you insist on being simpleminded? How long will you mockers relish your mocking? How long will you fools hate knowledge?*

²³ *Come and listen to my counsel. I'll share my heart with you and make you wise.*

²⁴ *"I called you so often, but you wouldn't come. I reached out to you, **but you paid no attention.***

²⁵ You ignored my advice and rejected the correction I offered.
²⁶ So I will laugh when you are in trouble! I will mock you when disaster overtakes you—
²⁷ when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster engulfs you like a cyclone, and anguish and distress overwhelm you.
²⁸ “When they cry for help, I will not answer. Though they anxiously search for me, they will not find me.
²⁹ For they hated knowledge and chose not to fear the Lord.
³⁰ **They rejected my advice** and paid no attention when I corrected them.
³¹ Therefore, they must eat the bitter fruit of living their own way, choking on their own schemes.

³² For simpletons turn away from me—to death. Fools are destroyed by
³³ their own complacency. But all who listen to me will live in peace, untroubled by fear of harm.”

The repetition in John’s Gospel is there for a purpose. No one must miss the central issues of life and death which Jesus raised. These are issues that you and I face today just as surely as the people of Israel had to face them.¹⁴

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, revealed the loving heart of God the Father, who was willing to take the form of a man and willingly lay down His life for His sheep.¹⁵

Jesus, in the incident at Bethany, also showed us the full extent of God’s power. The eternal life Christ offers brings us a resurrection power that begins operating in the here and now and continues into eternity (Philippians 3:10). God is able to bring life even to the dead areas in our personalities today.¹⁶

Let us not be like Uncle Andrew who made himself unable to hear Aslan’s voice. Instead let each of us respond with faith to the voice of God. Unlike the men and women of Jesus’ day who held back, we need to hear in Jesus the voice of the Good Shepherd, and choose to follow Him.¹⁷

¹⁴ Richards, Larry; Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Teacher's Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1987, S. 736.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.