



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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John 12:37-43 Commentary New Revised Standard Version

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further follow the verse-by-verse [*International Bible Study Commentary*](#). **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Study Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [*International Bible Study Forum*](#).

(John 12:37) Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him.

Throughout John's Gospel thus far, we have seen many people believing in Jesus and others refusing to believe. Most often, those refusing to believe in Jesus are the religious leaders who think they will have too much to lose to believe in Him. These unbelievers prefer their power, prestige, and position in this world to following Jesus no matter what He offers believers—even the gift of eternal life. In John 17:3, Jesus defined eternal life: "And this is

eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” In John 3, Jesus said that those who believe in Him are not judged, but those who do not believe in the name of the only Son of God are condemned. Then in John 3:19-20, Jesus summarized, “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.” To better understand the next few verses, we need to remember that some people love falsehood more than they love the truth because their deeds are evil; therefore, they will not believe in or believe the truth.

Jesus’ signs were not magic tricks. Jesus performed unselfish, loving, wonderful works of God to bless others in ways that only God could do with a completely benevolent motivation. Jesus changed water into wine to bless a newly married couple. Jesus gave sight to a man born blind and led him to saving faith in Him. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead to bless his family and reveal himself as the Resurrection and the Life that people might trust in Him and receive the gift of eternal life. Jesus’ signs proved He is the One He said He is.

(John 12:38) This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

In this verse, John quoted Isaiah 53:1, which began Isaiah's prophecy of the coming of the Suffering Servant Messiah in Isaiah 53:1-12. From the study of Isaiah 53, we see how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. Notice, for example, these words in Isaiah 53:3, "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account." The prophet Isaiah foretold the way unbelievers would treat Jesus, and both Isaiah and John have given good and sufficient reasons to believe Jesus and believe in Jesus. Then in Isaiah 53:5, we learn why the Father sent His Son to be treated in this horrific way by unbelievers: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." The Old and New Testaments reveal God's long-suffering and sacrificial love for us in Jesus, but still, many will not believe in Him.

In answer to the question, "Lord, who has believed our message?" We know many of the religious authorities did not believe the message of the Father and the Son that Jesus preached. Those who preferred living in darkness (doing evil) to living in light (doing truth) refused to believe in Jesus and His message. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus preached, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

In answer to the question, “to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” Jesus revealed the arm (the power) of the Lord to everyone through His compassionate signs and works of God. Still, those who preferred doing works of evil instead of works of divine love refused to believe in Him. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah and experienced some of what Isaiah himself experienced when he shared God’s message.

(John 12:39) And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said,

Why could they not believe? The answer is difficult, but not impossible, to explain. In Isaiah 6:8-13, Isaiah spoke about his call from the LORD to serve as His prophet and to warn the Jews to turn from their idolatry and turn back to the LORD. These verses also point to the coming of Jesus the Messiah who, like Isaiah, forewarned the unrepentant to turn to God or suffer destruction. Jesus offered the complete forgiveness of God to repentant sinners who believed in Him as the promised Messiah. In Isaiah 6:13, Isaiah prophesied about the coming of Jesus the Messiah as “the holy seed,” saying, “The holy seed is its stump.” He meant that after the Babylonians destroyed the Kingdom of Judah and carried many of the Jews away into exile, from “the stump of Judah” that remained God promised to send “the holy seed.” We learn from the Scriptures that “the holy seed” is God’s only Son, Jesus, who is of the tribe of Judah and the lineage of King David. From the prophets foretelling His coming and from the

preaching and the signs of Jesus, everyone who saw and heard Jesus had good reasons to believe that He was God's promised Messiah, but John wrote that they did not and, indeed, they could not believe. Why?

As part of his prophecy about Jesus and how Jesus would be received, Isaiah experienced some of what Jesus would later experience. John said that many of those who heard Jesus preach and saw His signs could not believe in Him. To explain, John referred to Isaiah's experience, because the LORD told Isaiah that many could not believe him. After many warnings, as a result of many of the Jews continual refusal to turn from their idols and wicked ways to trust in the LORD God and obey His Law as revealed in their Scriptures, as part of God's punishment they could not believe and repent when their day of final destruction neared. Because they continually refused to turn to the LORD in repentance and faith in the LORD, the LORD finally sent the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem, burn the temple, and destroy those who had persisted in doing evil despite repeated warnings. Those who refused to heed the warnings of the LORD perished. The punishment of the Jews in Isaiah's day and the punishment of the Jews in Jesus' day serve as a warning to all who hear the good news of forgiveness for repentant believers in Jesus, but who prefer to do evil as they postpone turning from evil to serve the living God.

(John 12:40) “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.”

John quoted Isaiah to explain why unrepentant people cannot believe Isaiah or Jesus. As part of Isaiah’s call to be a prophet, in Isaiah 6:9-10, the LORD told Isaiah, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.” God told Isaiah that he would preach, but most his hearers would not understand and repent because they could not. Because the LORD’s command seems so harsh and unreasonable, to better understand what the LORD, Isaiah, and John meant, we need to first look at Pharaoh, Moses, and the Exodus.

As the LORD foretold Moses, Pharaoh refused to believe Moses when the LORD sent Moses to free His people from slavery in Egypt. Sometimes God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and sometimes Pharaoh hardened his own heart. For examples, we read in Exodus 9:12, “But *the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh*, and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.” And in Exodus 9:34, we read, “But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, *he sinned once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials.*”

The Bible clearly teaches that we sin when we harden our hearts and refuse to do what God has revealed in the Scriptures and when we refuse to obey the moral law or the Ten Commandments (also known as the Law of Love). As Pharaoh's father did before him, for many years Pharaoh had persisted in doing great evils. For example, his father had ordered the death of all the newborn baby boys who were born to the Jews (even today, some murder unborn and newly born babies), but Moses survived. Eventually, because of Pharaoh's persistence in doing evil deeds and to save His people, the LORD sent Moses to Pharaoh and punished Pharaoh by hardening his heart so he could not believe Moses. Because of his persistent sinning, Pharaoh's punishment included God hardening Pharaoh's heart so he could not repent. To "harden" can mean to "strengthen." Pharaoh wanted to do evil because he loved doing evil. As in the days of Noah, "every inclination of the thoughts of [Pharaoh's] heart was only evil continually" (see Genesis 6:5). When Pharaoh's heart was not strong enough or hard enough to keep doing the evil he wanted to do when suffering God's plagues upon Egypt, as punishment God hardened Pharaoh's heart so Pharaoh kept doing what he selfishly wanted to do. Hardening his heart was part of God's plan to punish Pharaoh for his continual unrepentant evil thoughts and deeds, to reveal His glory, and to free His people from slavery with a mighty hand. As the LORD told Moses in Exodus 3:19, "I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand." The

LORD also hardened Pharaoh's heart and multiplied His signs and wonders in the land of Egypt so the Egyptians would know that "I am the LORD" (see Exodus 7:1-6). Perhaps when the Egyptians saw the LORD defeat all their idols, including Pharaoh who had taught them that he was a god, some would repent of their evil deeds and believe in the LORD as the one true God.

John explained that God blinded the eyes and hardened the hearts of those who loved darkness and wanted to persist in their evil ways and not believe in Jesus. As punishment for their sins and their refusal to repent and turn to the LORD God through faith in His Son, God punished those who wanted to continue doing evil and not believe in Jesus by making it impossible for them to see with their eyes, understand with their hearts and turn to the Father and the Son that He might forgive them and spiritually heal them. As Paul later explained in Romans 1:21-22, "For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools." In John's gospel, God warned that He would not forgive hardened unrepentant sinners after their time (or after their opportunity) to turn from their sins and believe in Jesus had come to an end. John explained Jesus' teaching in John 12:35: "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going." In Isaiah's day and Jesus' day,

darkness had finally overtaken the unrepentant, so they could not believe and repent and be saved. The same has happened to many others for almost 2000 years.

(John 12:41) Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him.

Happily, John reported that before the Father sent the Word in flesh into the world as Jesus, who came as the promised Messiah, that Isaiah saw His glory, the glory of the Son of God. Students of the Bible sometimes call this a preincarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. Among other truths, the preincarnate Son of God revealed to Isaiah that He would come as a Suffering Servant Messiah. In a similar way, King David saw the glory of the Lord Jesus before He came into the world as the Word made flesh. For this reason, the Pharisees could not answer Jesus' question and explain what David meant when he wrote in Psalms 110:1, "The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'" (see Matthew 22:41-46). David and Isaiah saw the Lord Jesus in His glory before He was born, and Jesus would soon return to that former glory after He ascended into heaven; however, He would return even more glorified as fully human and fully God and be seated at the right hand of the Father. The Book of Isaiah pointed to the coming of Jesus Christ, the response He would receive from believers and unbelievers, and why He would receive these different responses of belief and unbelief.

(John 12:42) Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue;

Though everyone has sinned, John made clear that not all the religious authorities were evil, some honestly tried to serve God. Those who were not evil were open to repenting and being born again when they learned the truth about God and Jesus. Nicodemus showed he was not evil when he went to see Jesus at night (as described in John 3:1-21). Like Nicodemus, some of the religious teachers and authorities tried to love and obey the LORD God, but they were ignorant. Jesus explained in John 3:21, “But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Nicodemus knew that Jesus was a teacher sent from God, so he went to Jesus (to the light) to learn from Him. As a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus had committed himself to teaching the truth up to the level of his understanding and he wanted to understand more about God and Jesus, so he went to see Jesus. He was one of “those who do what is true;” therefore, he came to the Light, to Jesus who is the Truth. Nicodemus was one who wanted to live in such way that it might be clearly seen that his deeds had been done in God, so Nicodemus was one of the authorities who believed in Jesus. John does not tell us, but prior to Jesus’ crucifixion, Nicodemus may have been one of those who did not confess Jesus publicly because of the Pharisees, for fear that he would be put out of the synagogue and

forbidden to teach. He knew the Pharisees had expelled the man born blind that Jesus healed because he confessed Jesus. Because many of the Pharisees loved darkness, they did not want anyone to go to the Light.

(John 12:43) for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.

In John 12:26, Jesus promised, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.” Here, John explained why some believed in Jesus, but refused to acknowledge their belief because they might be expelled from the synagogue, which meant they would lose their power, privilege, and position. Many of these authorities knew they might suffer financially and in other ways if they publicly acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah. What do people love and seek more: honor and glory from humans or honor and glory from God? Jesus did not mean that believers in Him should needlessly throw their lives away by throwing their pearls (their beliefs and their reasons for their beliefs in Jesus) before swine and dogs. In Matthew 7:6, Jesus warned, “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.” Jesus was no coward, but for good reasons Jesus sometimes quietly hid from His enemies. In John 12:36, Jesus told a crowd the truth, saying “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” Then, John reported, “After Jesus had said this,

he departed and hid from them.” The real question for every Christian is: “Am I hiding my faith in Jesus and keeping quiet because I prefer the approval, honor, and praise that others can give me more than the approval, honor, and praise that God can give me for believing in and telling others about Jesus—the Lord and Savior of the world.”

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. What should have convinced those who saw Jesus to believe in Him?
2. What questions did Isaiah ask? How were these questions answered?
3. Why were some people unable to believe in Jesus?
4. Why do you think the Lord did this to these people?
5. Why did some who believed in Jesus prefer not to confess it? Do some still have this problem today?

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