

The Power of Unbelief John 11:45-53

You know what is fascinating about these verses is this is not what we would expect would come next. Think about it. If you were reading this gospel and Lazarus was raised from the dead, what would you expect to find out next? For me, it would be the reaction of the Mary and Martha, and of course Lazarus. Were his sisters filled with joy and astonishment? Were tears flowing down their faces as they hugged Lazarus. We want to see the Hallmark movie moment at the end. We also want to question Lazarus about the whole experience. What was death like? Where did you go, and what did you see? But here is the truth about the narrative: we do not have any of that, and at best all we can do is speculate and wonder.

Now why do we not have the reaction of this little family that Jesus loved? And the answer is contained in the prayer of Jesus to the Father in verse 42, **“I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.”** Jesus does this sign to point to him and the key here is **“they may believe that you sent me.”** The object of our faith is the one the Father sent. It is Jesus Christ. Remember the whole point of this gospel - these signs are selected by John so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ and have life through his name. The word of God is not given to answer all our fascinations but to point and direct our hearts to Jesus - the Author and Finisher of our faith.

So right after the miracle of the raising of Lazarus we have the response. And the response in the text is two-fold, with a greater explanation of the second response. But look at the first response in verse 45, **“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.”** Now notice here that it was many of the Jews who had come with Mary. The meaning here is that they are associated with Mary, and with the ending **“believed in him,”** the reason why they believed is not only did they witness the miracle but they had the witness of Mary. She spoke about Jesus, about her trust and faith in him. And through her witness and the sign of the raising of Lazarus many believed. It confirmed in their minds any doubts whether Jesus was the Christ. A number of the Jews present believed on Jesus.

But the vast majority of this section is taken up with the response of those who saw and those who heard about this sign and rejected Jesus as the Messiah. And it is amazing that God has called us to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. And because he has called us to be witnesses and testify of Jesus, I believe many times we think we have more power than we truly do. We do not realize how hardened individuals are in sin, and how dead they are spiritually. Many Christian parents see their children walk away from the faith, many pastors see members of their congregation who at one time professed Christ walk away totally from Jesus, and many of you have had good friends who professed Christ, has deep conversations and delightful times of fellowship, but some of those individuals have nothing to do with Jesus today. If you have been a Christian for any length of time you know this reality.

And here is the thing: it burdens and pains our hearts. And in our pain and agony we try to make sense of someone that we love walking away from Christ. And the way that we usually we do that is to look to self rather than theologically. If I only would

have done this or said that or been more involved here. And here is the thing: we have much to work with and it is easy to blame self because all of us are in the process of being sanctified and none of us are perfected into the image of Christ. There are still times we think more about ourselves, or say and do things we ought not to do. And many good Christian parents, not perfect parents, beat themselves up that their children have gone astray because they look back with regret at some of the things that they have done. The same goes with Christian workers and friends. And we should learn from our sins, especially when God reveals them to our hearts. But ultimately we could be the best parents, pastor or friend, and people will still walk away because of the power of sin. They are dead spiritually. We have bought the lie that we have or had more power and ability than we truly did.

In the end what this causes is not celebratory Christians but defeated Christians. And it does something else: it causes us to rely on ourselves with something that only God can do. Just like Lazarus, the only one who can give life is God - is Jesus. Think of it: how often are you passionately coming to God and praying for those whom you loved? How often are we coming and asking God to give life to the dead and wayward? If you do not realize how needy people are we will keep relying on self to do what only God can do. The people that you love are so dead in sin that they need a spiritual resurrection. If there is any passage that should convince us of the sinfulness of man, it is this passage right here. May God help us to not only live lives as his witnesses but also to rely on him to do what we cannot do.

1. First, we need to see the question asked. Vv. 46-47

It is amazing to look at monumental things that happen in life, things that happen in society that are life altering because you usually have two different responses. The bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York was appalling to so most, but there were some militants who applauded and rejoiced over that same event. We realize that the abortion laws in the US might be overturned and we as believers rejoice over the saving of innocent lives. But there is another sector of society that is passionately angry and even hostile to that decision by the Supreme Court. And here in our text, something monumental happens. Jesus gives life to a man who was dead four days in the grave. It calls for a response from everyone. Some rejoice and are overwhelmed with the Lord and Saviour of our souls. Jesus is the Christ!

But there is another response. And it is a surprising response. One in our own rationale as the people of God we do not see coming. We think someone rising from the dead would give so much proof of the personhood of Jesus that everyone would bow down before him. But look at verse 46, **“but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.”** Look at the word “but,” it is bringing in a contrast. And it is again an astonishing contrast because it is indicating there is a different response than the one we have just read about believing on Jesus. we would think that is the only response. But there were some who in their obstinance still reject and even hated Jesus. And what do you do when you hate and reject Jesus? You find others that agree with you. And they go, not to inflame the seeds of belief, but the flames and anger at the Lord Jesus because what he did in raising Lazarus. The Pharisees of course are the chief enemies of Jesus throughout the gospels.

And if you want to see how strong this hatred of Jesus is, look at the next verse, **“So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.’”** The chief priests along with the Pharisees gathered together the council or the ruling and religious body of the Jews - the Sanhedrin. And it is amazing because the Pharisees were more conservative in their beliefs. They believed in the miracles of the Old Testament, but the vast majority of the Sanhedrin were made up of Sadducees, who were theological liberals. But opposition and hatred make people allies. And they are together in their concern, denunciation and hatred of Jesus, and wanting to terminate his life.

And let me say it is amazing to look at the sovereignty of God in this section, because soon Jesus will enter Jerusalem, and the religious leaders will be given an opportunity to take him. And this last of the seven miracles that is recorded by the hand of Jesus in this gospel, this one was the last draw for them. They are concerned that all people will begin to follow him if he keeps doing these miracles and these signs and wonders. But look at the question that they ask because it really is a good question. They have the wrong answer but it is a great question: **“What are we do?”** Now there is a sense of exasperation in this question and frustration, but at the same time we are reminded that when Jesus is presented, when his miracles are made known, then people have to make a decision about him. No one is neutral when it comes to Jesus. When people trust him or reject him, they never do it without passion. One is overwhelmed with reverence in awe of Jesus. The other is filled with bitterness and hatred. Listen to 2 Corinthians 2:16, **“to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?”** Isn't it like that? Jesus is a fragrance of life to us. We cannot imagine anyone rejecting or why anyone would ever reject Jesus. But for others Jesus is a fragrance of death to death. They see nothing worthy in Jesus, only death that will ultimately lead to their death.

And there is something amazing here is the reason why they ask this question - what to do with Jesus - **“For this man performs many signs.”** Remember what signs are. They are pointing to something. And who these signs are pointing to is the person of Jesus Christ. I do find the deadness and the hardness of the heart that does not believe on Christ difficult because we cannot understand it. And the reason is that God has given us light, and it is so clear, logical, and gloriously obvious who Jesus is and the need to trust him. And if you ever think that you have the power to convert the souls, and not truly believe in the doctrine of total depravity, then consider that people are present hearing Jesus' words that he is the resurrection and the life, and then even giving a visual illustration of that truth, but their dead hearts still reject Jesus.

And there is another truth that needs to be emphasized in this passage, and that is we think if we can answer every question that people have then they will trust in Christ. And we ought to be ready to give an answer to everyone of the hope we have in us. But people come up with apologetical arguments as far as the existence of God or the historical proof of the resurrection or proof for creationism. And I am very thankful for these ministries and these truths because they strengthen the faith of the faithful. But the subtle error that creeps in many times is that if I can answer every objection then people will believe, that the rational aspect of man is enough to save him. Just overcome the objections.

But there is another Lazarus in Scripture. Remember the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man pleads that Abraham would send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers then they would repent and believe. And listen to how Abraham responds in Luke 16:31, **“He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”** If the Holy Spirit of God does not give spiritual life through the preaching of the gospel, people are so dead in trespasses and sins that even if someone comes back from the dead they will not believe. We see that come to pass right in our passage before us, and even after the death and resurrection of Christ. Many believed but most still rejected Jesus.

Nothing will make us more boastful of Christ and thankful for him that salvation from first to last is all of him than seeing total depravity. If God does not move there is no salvation. Our boast is in our God. Salvation is of the Lord. But also, nothing will make us more passionate in giving the gospel and in praying because we know that there is one that can open the heart. He can overcome the foulest unbelief. How do we know that? We are here tonight worshiping and adoring him. When the question was posed to us: What are we to do with Jesus? Our response is so different from these individuals, not because of our greatness but because of his efficacious grace in our lives to overcome that unbelief by giving life where there was only deadness.

2. Secondly, reasons to reject Jesus. V. 48.

People will always think of a whole host or litany of reasons why they reject Jesus. But most reasons have to do with their sin, and what they want in the here and now. They would rather have something in the creation rather than bow the knee to the Creator. They would rather have comfort and the world than Jesus as Lord and Saviour. And they know that they cannot have both. You see that in the Parable of the soils. The seed of God’s Word is preached and you have four different responses. One gives no time to even listening to it. It is the hardened soil. There is the good soil that responds and you can’t see because there is abundant fruit and an ongoing harvest. But there are two responses that look authentic but in the end reject Christ. And it is amazing why they reject. It is not because that the message is faulty but they want something in creation more than Jesus. It is not because they even doubt his miracles or his resurrection. They might try and deny these truths, but ultimately their rejection is because sinful hearts crave the creation rather than Jesus.

Listen to the seed of God’s Word sown among the shallow soil, Matthew 13:20-21, **“As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.”** Notice why he or she turns. It has nothing to do with some fault in the truth of God’s Word, but someone would rather have the comforts of this life rather than the security that is found in Christ. It is an inconceivable trade off for those who truly God’s people.

And listen to the response of those whose are represented by the thorny ground, Matthew 13:22, **“As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”** What is the deceitfulness of riches? It is basically life

is found in things — riches. For believers in Christ, life, true life, eternal life, new life, abundant life, life in its fullest sense is found in him. But unbelief has its hopes and aspirations on the here and now, and Jesus will destroy those hopes and aspirations. He will destroy who you even think you are.

So look at verse 48 with this in mind now, **“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”** Let me give short hand what they say here, and then explain it a little further. It is this: if we let Jesus keep going he is going to destroy our lives. I do not know how many people believe that. If I trust in Jesus, all I will do is suffer and be lonely. If I trust in Jesus I will not be able to taste all the good fruits and sins of this life. Unbelief does not want Jesus and does not want others to believe in him. If we let him keep going he is going to destroy our lives. The Roman’s will come and the Romans hate religious fervour and hate opposition and they will quickly put it down. They will take away “our place,” in other words, “our temple.” The nation will be destroyed.

Now what is wrong with that concern? One is that the nation and the Temple were never theirs. They were to be caretakers and point hearts and lives to faith in Christ. The other was they had the O.T. They knew the strength and glory of God to deliver the nation. Remember Jericho? Remember what happened on the seventh day as they marched around Jericho? Joshua 6:20, **“So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city.”** The people shout and the trumpets blast and the walls come down. And this impenetrable city is laid flat. This is none other than the Lord’s doing. Or how did Gideon defeat the Midian army. Gideon’s forces God whittled down from 22,000 to 10,000, and then to 300. And he destroyed the whole army of Midian with torches in jars, trumpets and a call. Or remember the huge army of Assyria encamped around Jerusalem, and listen to 2 Kings 19:35, **“And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.”** And here is Jesus who has power over death. Who is Rome compared to God? They knew the power and glory of God, but they refused to trust in Him.

And what was the real reason they refused to trust in him? They were not so much afraid of the Romans crushing Israel, but they were afraid of losing their own positions and ease of living. If Jesus is who he says he is then it exposes their hypocrisy and why they do what they do. Jesus cannot be allowed to exist. They are not willing to suffer. They are not willing to take up their crosses and follow Jesus. Why? Because unbelief lives for the here and now. You look at why individuals have turned their backs on Jesus it is very rarely because they have doubts about Jesus. They might say that is the reason, but the truth is they want this world.

And here is the sign of divine life. We are and do suffer for him. We give up what we cannot keep knowing that through Jesus he gives us what we cannot lose. But the only reason we can make that connection is because of his grace in our lives. Realizing again, the extent of depravity and the darkness of the human heart helps us understand why people do what they do, but also causes us to give thanks to the one

who gave us light. We come to praise him and look to him to give life to others. Praise God for his effective grace in our lives.