

Unbelief Some Belief and True Belief

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[0 : 00] Well, now we are into April, well into April, and probably some of you have been doing some reporting, whether that is reporting for pupils at the end of the academic year or reporting that dreaded report income and revenue to HMRC. I was chatting to a guy that I've gotten to know on dog walks this week. He said he'd just finished filling in his tax return, and for all the hardship of doing it, he said it gave him the opportunity every year to reflect on the past year, to understand what had happened, and then to understand what needed to happen going forward.

Now, he was speaking, of course, purely financially, but John in this passage this morning does that for us in a different sense. He gives us a kind of spiritual report at the end of Jesus' public ministry. See from verse 37, at the beginning of the passage we read, he gives us the results of Jesus' ministry, and then he explains those results, and then from verse 44, he lets Jesus set out for us what needs to happen going forward. Because we've come to this point in the gospel, not to the end of the school year or the tax year, but at the end of three years of Jesus' public ministry. We see that in verse 36, just the verse just before the start of our passage, when he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them. So this is a huge turning point in John's gospel that we have been going through together as a church, from Jesus calling his very first followers back in chapter one, all the way through to the unstoppable seeking and finding of Jesus by all the world. Well, Jesus has been out in the open, hasn't he, telling everyone who he is, calling whoever to come to him, that anyone and whoever might come and put their faith in him. But that window of opportunity is about to close in this gospel. Jesus prepared us for that last week, didn't he? You're going to have the light just a little while longer, he told the crowd.

And indeed, from chapters 13 to 17, Jesus' work goes on behind closed doors. His words are going to be just for the 12, just for his people. And so at the end of this all-important period of Jesus' open and public speaking and acting, what are the results? And more importantly for us today, what are we to make of those results? And what are we to do as we go forward?

You know, end of year reporting is a risky illustration, isn't it, to use at the beginning of a sermon, at the risk of putting you all to sleep. But as my dog-walking friend says, it is very important for us, isn't it? And a wonderful opportunity not to be missed, to reflect, take stock, and to make a path forward. And by helping us look back on Jesus' time so far, well, John helps us get a grasp on where we are spiritually and look forward to what's needed spiritually as we go on from here. So firstly, then, understanding the results. What are the results of three years of Jesus preaching, teaching, healing, resurrecting openly, publicly, visibly for three years? Well, we see, maybe surprisingly, they are mixed results. On the one hand, verse 37, even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.

[4 : 16] This crowd has seen and heard everything that Jesus did and said, and yet they respond with unbelief. On the other hand, though, have a look at verse 42, yet at the same time, many, even among the leaders, believed in him. So there are, says John, other people, unlikely people, who have seen and heard the same things that Jesus said and did, and yet have responded in the opposite way by believing him.

Now, just to take those two sets of results at face value, what is our gut reaction to that report? Perhaps they seem to us less than impressive. Perhaps we ask, did God really send his son from heaven into the world to save the world, only to get such a half-hearted and half-baked response from the world?

Does that count as a success? And if it's not a success, well, what has gone wrong? Was Jesus not clear enough? Well, he has hardly held back, has he? He's claimed in this gospel, in this book we've read, to have been sent from heaven, to come from God, to speak from God, to be equal with God, to be God. He has gone around saying things like this, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never go hungry. Whoever believes in me will never go thirsty. I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. He's not subtle, is he?

And to prove what he's been saying about himself is true, he has done signs and wonders. Those are the signs that John is talking about. He's turned water into wine. He's fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread. He gave life to a dying child. He's given sight to the blind. He made a lame man stand up and walk.

[6 : 40] He's made the dead rise from the grave. In short, Jesus could not have done anything more, could he? He could not have been clearer about who he was. All the cards are on the table. Who he is, what he does, is there for anyone, whoever to see. And yet, says John, even after that, even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still did not believe. And perhaps there's a part of us that counts that then as a failed mission. God has given everything to save the world, and the world has given a half-hearted shrug in return. Perhaps part of us thinks, you know, even if the Jewish people who had God's promises and prophecies and privileges, God's own people didn't believe in

Jesus when he came, well, what hope do we have so far removed from that time and that place? Has God failed? But John has been open from the very beginning of this book about the outcome of Jesus' ministry. This is chapter one. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. That's chapter one of this book. So, if this had counted as failure, well, John would hardly have carried on, would he? We would hardly have his gospel if he hadn't considered Jesus' ministry in life to have been worthwhile. But he's showing us again, he's bringing us back around to these results now so that we can see they are part of a bigger story. So, now John's going to help us understand these results, why it was the way it was, and why mainly we don't have to worry about those results.

But here's a fair warning, okay? The answer isn't easy, and so follow with me. This is point 1A, if you're following through the unbelief. Why the unbelief? And well, here's the explanation John gives from verse 38. It was, he says, to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet.

Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Now, we saw a couple of weeks ago in Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, that all God's promises rest on him. He is the yes to every promise God has made, the king who has come to rescue from sin and death.

But here we see God's ancient promises of a different kind. Well, they also rest on Jesus, because this prophecy from Isaiah says that when the good news finally came, well, it wouldn't be believed. And so John's simply pointing out these results, they shouldn't be a surprise, because God has always told us it would be this way. And more than that, God not only knew the mixed results ahead of time, but those results, John tells us, were part of God's plan.

[10 : 07] Verse 37, Luke tells us that they still would not believe. But verse 39 goes further than that, Luke. For this reason, they could not believe. Because as Isaiah says elsewhere, he has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so that they neither can see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn, says God, and I would heal them. Now, what can we say to that? It's not a comfortable report for us to read, is it? But it's so important that we understand this rightly.

John is saying that the crowds who have been with Jesus did not believe in him because God did not give them eyes to see and hearts to understand him, so that even though Jesus was standing right in front of him, they could not turn to him and believe. Now, let's back up a wee bit. The context for this is all important. Notice we saw this, the order John puts it, verse 37, they would not believe. Then, verse 39, for this reason, they could not believe. That's so important for us, isn't it? These people, John is saying, willfully chose to close their hearts to Jesus before finding that God had in fact closed their hearts for good. God's plan and human choice are both at work here.

One writer, Don Carson, he helps us understand it in this way. The hardening of their hearts, he says, was a holy condemnation of guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen.

When did these people choose to close their hearts? Well, John is saying it is the fruit of hundreds of years of rebellion, closing their hearts from the time of Israel, the time of Israel, 700 years earlier.

[12 : 20] If for hundreds of years, God's people had pushed God away. Jesus sums up this history for us in a parable from Mark chapter 12. He says, a man, that is God owned a vineyard, that is his people.

And he leased it out to tenants, that is the leaders of the people. And when the time came, he said, for the harvest, the man sent one of his servants to collect what he was owed.

And what did the tenants do to the servants? Well, they beat him and send him away empty-handed back to the master. And so the man waits, and then he sent another servant.

And they did the same to him, says Jesus. He sent another servant, and this one they killed. He sent servant after servant. Some they beat, some they killed, says Jesus.

And he's telling us in that parable, God's patient and gracious dealings over hundreds of years with his rebellious people. God, over hundreds of years, sent servants, the prophets, to call his people back, to give him what was rightfully his, the worship and glory he has owed.

[13 : 37] And his people treated his prophets shamefully, beat them, killed them, sent them back empty-handed. And it's at that point, at that point, says Jesus, he still had one other, a beloved son.

Finally, the man says, I will send my son to them. They won't turn him away. Well, what would God's people do when God sent his own son to them?

Now we know the back story. It's not hard for us to guess, is it? Jesus tells us they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. And this is indeed what God's people did to God's son. But was it really a surprise? You notice how long by that time they had been doing that, hardening their hearts against God, pushing him away. God knew what they would do to his son because they had been doing it to his servants for centuries.

And for that reason, says John, because, because they had closed their hearts to him at every opportunity. Well, at last, God finally closed their hearts to him for good.

[14 : 51] Now, sometimes this thought of God's sovereignty and salvation can be scary for us. But we can believe it, trusting and knowing who God is and his character.

God is not a tyrant. He does not condemn people for no reason. He doesn't stop people turning to him who have not chosen that for themselves.

But he does, says the Bible, in his purity and holiness and righteousness, fairly harden the hearts of those who have chosen to close their hearts against him.

And that is a serious thing for us to consider, isn't it? The Bible tells us God is sovereignly in control of all things, even our hearts.

But the Bible tells us, too, that we are responsible for the way that we respond to God. And both those things are true. And there are a thousand things that we could take away from this this morning.

[16 : 01] But John only wants us to take one thing from this passage, and it's this. The reason that the crowds did not believe in Jesus was not because Jesus failed or because God's plan did not work.

It was all in God's plan, all part of his working in the world, all part of his righteous dealings with his sinful people. Ultimately, we see it was part of a bigger plan for rescue.

Because in a massive twist, when Peter preaches this same truth after Jesus had died and been raised, while these same crowds do respond differently, rightly, Peter says, This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge.

There's God's sovereignty, his control. And then he says, You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. There is their human responsibility. But this time, when the people heard this, what happened?

They were cut to the heart. They said to Peter and the apostles, What shall we do? And three thousand of them turned to Jesus and asked for his forgiveness and put their trust in him and were saved.

[17 : 21] Because though they chose to close their hearts against God, And though it was fair and right for God to harden their hearts, Yet, Yet, when they heard the good news, God, in his kindness and in his grace, Instead, cut them to the heart.

And cut away the hardness and opened up their hearts again to receive and to believe in Jesus. And that is not what they deserved, is it?

And it is not, friends, what we have deserved for pushing God away, For living life without him. We deserve for him to have turned his back on us forever.

We deserve, don't we, for him to have blinded our eyes and hardened our hearts, So that we who would not turn to him, could not turn to him.

But praise be to God, For his inexpressible gift. Have a look at this in verse 42, And see God's undeserved kindness and love lavished on rebels like us.

[18 : 34] Yet, at the same time, Many, even among the leaders, believed in him. And so, this is point 1b.

We see, too, some belief. How did they come to believe? And others didn't. John says they saw the same things.

It was not for lack of evidence. No, John would have a see, It is only. Only God's kind and gracious hand. In healing their blindness, Softening their hard hearts to see and understand, And turn to Jesus, And enter eternal life.

If they had lived today, They might well have sung, As we will sing later, Amazing grace. How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, But now I'm found, Was blind, But now I see. My friends, If you cannot yet sing those words from the heart, If you do not as yet believe in Jesus, Know today, That God can do that for you.

[19 : 47] That is what John is saying. Ask him to do that. And if you trust him to do that with an undivided heart, He will. He will save you. And brothers and sisters, If you can sing those words today from the heart, Well, John wants you to know, It is only because God, Out of his amazing grace, Kindness you did not deserve, Gave you a new heart, And opened your eyes to see, And understand, And turn to him, And be healed.

But even then, Even then, For us, There is a challenge here, Isn't there? Because even those who believed in Jesus, Look, Verse 42, Even those who believed, Because of the Pharisees, They would not openly acknowledge their faith, For fear that they would be put out of the synagogue, For they loved human praise, More than praise from God.

So there is still, Isn't there? A holding back there. They believed in their hearts, But they did not confess with their mouths, They kept their faith private, And hidden, And secret, Because, We're told, They loved human praise, More than praise from God.

They saw Jesus, They knew that they needed him, But they would not be seen with him. And while it is a kind of faith, Well, John would have a seat, Is not the full and undivided faith, That Jesus wants from us.

Here's what I thought about this, I thought it was similar, To the situation, You know, Imagine, Rather, That you are getting married to somebody, And you were to say, To your fiancé, I don't want a public wedding, I want to be married secretly to ye.

[21 : 41] I don't want anyone to know, Okay? Says your fiancé, Okay, We can go with that. And so the wedding happens, But after the wedding, You say to your new husband, Your new wife, Well, Now I don't want to go out with you, Or be seen with you in public.

I want our whole marriage, To be in secret. Well, Your newlywed partner, Might wonder if you, Really love them at all.

Is that true love? They might ask. And so if we believe in Jesus, But won't confess it, Or live it publicly, Well, Jesus might rightly ask us, Is that true belief?

And so friends, This is a difficult, But important question. If you believe in Jesus, Does your belief stop short, Of true belief, In the one who has loved you, And given himself for you?

You, Where's the line, We might ask? How far is far enough? Well, Last week we heard Jesus say, Didn't we? Anyone who loves their life, Will lose it. While anyone who hates their life, In this world, Will keep it for eternal life.

[23 : 01] Jesus' demand is total. Loving our own lives, Loving human praise, More than we love God, And praise from God.

Jesus says, That is not yet true belief. And now perhaps, That is a challenge, For some of you this morning. And to be really clear, The question isn't, How much belief?

Okay, We can all, Christians, Pray, Can't we? Lord, I believe, Help my unbelief. That's not how much faith we have, Rather, The kind of faith that we have.

If you declare with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, And believe in your heart, That God raised him from the dead, Says Paul, You will be saved. But these guys are not, All the way there yet, Are they?

And it should cause us, To ask ourselves, Are we? Are we? Are we? For many here, I'm sure, The answer will be yes.

[24 : 07] But for some, Perhaps it will be, I'm not sure. And if you're not sure, I would love to speak to you about that, Today, In the week, Whenever, I'm here, I'm open, Me, Others would love to talk that through with you, If you are not sure, Where you stand with Jesus today, Because it is the all-important question, Friends, It's the question, John wants us to be certain of, And he does that, Doesn't he?

He leads us there, One last time, To listen to Jesus' invitation, Secondly, And finally, Jesus gets the microphone, For one last message, Before he leaves, The public stage, And finally then, Holding out the relationship, Or to see true belief, True belief, Have a read with me from verse 44, Then Jesus cried out, Whoever believes in me, Does not believe in me only, But in the one who sent me, The one who looks at me, Is seeing the one who sent me, I have come into the world as a light, So that no one who believes, In me, Should stay in darkness, We've heard the report, We've seen the explanation, So what needs to happen then, Going forward?

Well, John sums up, The whole point of this book, For us like this, In chapter 20, In verse 30, These things are written, So that you may believe, So that you may believe, That Jesus is the Messiah, The son of God, And that by believing, Might have life in his name, And that is exactly, The invitation that Jesus leaves, Before us, As he leaves the public spotlight, He holds out, At this saving, Life-giving relationship, With him, Yet again, Whoever believes in me, He says, This is called, The free offer of the gospel, It's held out to everyone, Whoever we are, Whatever our background, Whatever our lifestyle, That we might believe in Jesus, And so belong to God forever, See, The what's next of this report, Is not, Do you better next time?

Okay, As you might get on your school report, It is not, Room for improvement, The report says, You cannot improve, You can't do better, You can't improve, Your standing with God, And so the call is instead, To believe, In Jesus, How does that bring us to God?

Well, Says Jesus, Whoever believes in me, Does not believe in me only, But the one who sent me, He's saying, He came, So that we would be able, To come to God, Through him, That he shows us, What God is really like, Whoever sees me, Has seen the one who sent me, Whoever has seen me, He will say later, Has seen the father, And so to believe in Jesus, Is to belong to God, As Christians, Who God is, And what he is like, Isn't a mystery for us anymore, Because Jesus has come, And told us, And shown us, What he is like, In his life, Death, And resurrection, And so, How we come to God, Isn't a mystery anymore, For we come through him, That's why he said, I came into the world, As a light, So that no one, Who believes in me, Should stay in darkness, You've picked up already, What darkness means for John, It's that attitude, Of pushing God away,

[27 : 47] Saying no to him, Rebelling against him, And so for Jesus to say, That he has come, To take us out of that, Is saying, That he is the one, Who makes it possible, To leave that old life behind, For our hearts to be made near, To see him as he is, To live instead, Knowing God, To live with God, And what an invitation that is, Is I'm struck that, At the very end, To the very end, As the curtain is about to close, Jesus still holds out, This relationship, With God through himself, To whoever, Would put their trust in him, And so he holds it out today, For us, To whoever would put their trust, In him, And Jesus is so keen, That we hear these words, And believe them, And take hold of them, Isn't he?

He says he is not the judge, Of those who do not trust him, But there is a judge, He says, He came to save the world, But his words, Will judge the world, Didn't I tell ye?

Didn't I say it clearly enough, Jesus will say, On the last day, To those who have not believed, Didn't I say, That whoever believes in me, Will have eternal life, But you rejected me, And did not accept my words, And so now those words, Stand over ye in judgment, But lest we think, That Jesus is being heavy handed there, Well look where he finishes, This is verse 49, He says, I know, I know, That the command of the father, Leads to eternal life, And so whatever I say, Is just what the father, Has told me to say, Jesus says, I speak only God's words, And I do that, Because I know, That his words, Lead to eternal life, And so that's what I say, So that whoever hears them, Might have eternal life, And that is what Jesus holds out, To us today,

Still who hear these words, Of his, So long after his time on earth, Jesus speaks today, So that none of us, Might be condemned, So that none of us, Might stand before him, On the last day, And have those words, Repeated to us, In judgment, Jesus says those words, To us now, So that we might stand, Before him on that day, And have these words, Repeated to us, With joy, And with

that, The curtain drops, On the public ministry, Of Jesus, And the next time, He is seen in public, He will be bound, And beaten, Tried on false charges, And sentenced to death, Before then, We will follow him, Inside with the disciples, Hear his parting words, To the twelve, But until then, Jesus leaves us, With these questions, Yet again, As he has throughout this time, Do you see who I am? Do you believe in me? And will you receive, My gift of eternal life? Let's pray, For those things together, Now let's pray, God, Our Father, We are humbled, Before ye, The God, Of heaven and earth, He, He dwells in eternity, And in unapproachable light, And Father, We confess, That we do not deserve, The least thing from ye, Least of all to know ye, Or least of all, To be right with ye, And yet, In your great grace, And mercy, And compassion, You have looked on us, And our sin, With love, Lord, And rather than send us away, Empty handed, You draw us to yourself,

[32 : 01] To give us the gift, Of eternal life, Through Jesus Christ, Father, Father, Father, We thank you for setting him, Before us, Yet again, On this Lord's day, And we pray, Father, That we would go from here, With our hearts filled with him, Having taken hold of him, By faith, Lord, Ready to believe in him, And to confess him, With our mouths, Father, We pray that we would do so, Fearlessly, That we would not seek, The praise of other human beings, But rather, The praise that comes from ye, Lord, We pray that we would not fear, What others might think, Or say about us, But Father, You hold out to us, This great and wonderful gift, That can be found nowhere else, And there is none like ye, Father, We pray for those, Even here today, Who have not believed, In the Lord Jesus, And that in your great grace,

You might give them hearts, To see, And believe in him, And trust him, And come to ye, Lord, We pray that you might display him, Brightly and gloriously, Lord, That he might be irresistible to us, And Father, For those of us who have believed, That you would help our unbelief, For these things, We pray and ask, In Jesus' name, Amen.