

“The Dark Side of Salvation”

John 12:37-50

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Text Comments

We read vv. 37-43 last Lord's Day and dealt particularly with v. 41 and John's statement that the glory that Isaiah saw when he was given his vision of God in the temple, 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, was, nevertheless the glory of Christ, that is, the glory of God the Son.

v.37 This generation of Israel is like that generation of Moses' day to whom Moses said, "With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear." [Deut. 29:3-4] **But unbelief this broad, this deep, this intractable in defiance of the most stupendous signs requires some explanation. That now comes in what follows.**

v.44 The remaining verses of the chapter bring the Lord's public ministry to a close and amount to a final, summarizing statement. It is a final challenge to the crowds to believe that in Christ is the revelation of God to man and in him may be found eternal life. And the consequence for not believing in him, for rejecting him, is God's condemnation and the sinner's doom.

As you remember, this has been a major theme in John. The Son reveals the Father, he came into the world to do the Father's will, and faith in Jesus is faith in God the Father. So closely is the Son identified with the Father that in 14:9 he will tell us that to see the Son is to see the Father. We saw how much this was so last week.

v.47 Jesus has already taught (e.g. 3:36) that the wrath of God remains on those who do not believe in him. But that is not his purpose, to condemn. He came into the world to save. However, that salvation cannot help but make a division between men, between those who believe and those who do not. The same truth that is life and forgiveness to the believer is death and condemnation to the unbeliever. That cannot be helped.

v.48 Here is the familiar biblical idea that one will be judged according to the measure of his or her knowledge. These people who heard the Lord's words and saw his miracles and still did not believe will be judged accordingly.

v.49 The reason the Son's words are so final and threaten those who will not believe them with judgment is because they are the words of God the Father himself.

Now, I said last week, that we would look more carefully at the statements in vv. 38-40 to the effect that the reason so many Jews did not believe in Jesus – in spite of his authoritative teaching and in spite of his miracles and in spite of his perfect goodness – was that God had

blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts *so they would not believe and so that they would not be saved!*

Now that, to be sure, is a hard thing to hear and a harder thing to understand. God preventing people from being saved? God deadening a person's heart *precisely so he or she would not believe and be saved?* God seeing to it that people would not turn, would not repent is what he means, so that he would not have to save them? What is this? Where is John 3:16 in all of that? "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And where are a great many other texts? "God does not desire the death of the wicked but that all should come to repentance and the knowledge of the truth." Or, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets...how many times would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." God is love, the Bible says, but here he is working to prevent the salvation of people!

We are certainly not used to hearing that God *prevented someone from being saved!* In the Gospel of John the great message is what God has done *in order to save sinners*, but now we hear about him acting against their salvation. To be sure, we have already heard a great deal in this Gospel about God's sovereign grace. Jesus came into the world to save the people his Father had given to him. No one can come to him unless the Father in heaven draws that person. His sheep hear his voice and follow him and many would not follow him, he said in chapter 10, because they were not his sheep. But, these statements taken from Isaiah and applied to the Jews who would not believe – even in the face of the Lord's mighty miracles – are stronger still. Here the Lord is said to take steps *actually to prevent* a person from being saved.

Remember, the Gospel of John, as John himself tells us at the end of his book, in 20:31, was written with a view to persuading people to believe in Jesus Christ so that they might find eternal life. We might well think that John, and the Holy Spirit working through John, would have left these verses out of his Gospel. Someone who is considering faith in Jesus Christ and thinking about surrendering his or her life to him might well be confused, if not completely put off, by this strong statement that God gives salvation to some and withholds it from others. After all, when Christians are sharing their faith with non-Christians and are urging them to believe in Jesus for salvation, they usually, we usually make a point of not bringing up the issue of God's sovereignty in the matter of salvation and that salvation is his gift to some and not to others.

And make no mistake, the statements made here about Jewish unbelief and about why the Jews were intransigent in their unbelief, were just as controversial then as they are today. No one likes to be told that the issue of his own life and destiny is not in his own hands. No one likes to be told that God will do what pleases *Him* in regard to the salvation of men. No one wants to be told that he or she is absolutely dependent upon the good pleasure of God if he or she is to be saved. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 9, said virtually the same thing that John quotes Isaiah as saying here. He put it this way: "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and hardens whom he wants to harden." That is what Paul said. And when he said it, he anticipated that people would be offended and would react in predictable ways "you will think this and say that" he goes on to say. *Even Christians argue heatedly about and try to get round the fact that God is so completely in charge of man's salvation, as John and Jesus say here.*

In the biography of the great London preacher of the middle of the 20th century, Martin Lloyd Jones, we read that, as a young Christian, shortly after coming himself to see the truth of divine sovereignty in the matter of salvation or God's control over man's salvation, the doctrine that places *all things*, including the salvation of sinners, under the rule of God's eternal throne, he found himself on holiday with his brother Vincent in the home of their uncle. They began to discuss these things over lunch one day. The argument was still going when afternoon tea was served and finally concluded late in the evening, but only after Vincent had lost his voice! [Ian Murray, *Lloyd-Jones*, vol. 1, 60]

Often this is a doctrine, this doctrine we call election or sovereign grace, this teaching that, at the last, salvation is God's gift that he gives to some and not to others, however clearly and emphatically and repeatedly it is taught in the Bible, is one that even Christians often come to only very reluctantly and after much struggle. They want, somehow, to believe that at the last, at the final decisive point, a human being holds his destiny in his own hands. They want to believe that man is free, not simply in the sense that he does what he pleases, but that he is free to determine the outcome of his life, free to choose to go to heaven or to hell. We want to believe that that is our decision and no one else's. And it is not easy to give up that ground and admit that here, as everywhere else, the Lord God does what pleases *Him* in heaven and on earth.

The great Augustine no less, perhaps the Christian church's greatest mind after the age of the Apostles themselves, recollected near the end of his life, "In trying to solve this question I made strenuous efforts on behalf of the preservation of the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God defeated me." [*Retractions*, II, I]

Now this is a deep and high mystery for, after all, we, mere creatures and deeply sinful creatures at that, are talking about the heart and the will and the eternal purpose of Almighty God, who is far, far above us. How can we, who see and understand so little of the mind and the ways of the Almighty and whose perspective is so twisted by our sinful self-love and our inability to appreciate the holiness, the purity, the perfect goodness of God. And, it has not helped that there have been many who have not spoken about these matters in ways that respect that mystery. There have been many Christians and Christian ministers who have spoken about these things in ways that have made it even more difficult for readers of the Bible to accept the truth that is so clearly taught here. Years ago I studied a theologian, famous in his own day, a Pole by the name of Johannes Maccovius, who, in the early years of the 17th century, taught in the Reformed Seminary in Franeker, in the Netherlands. Maccovius was a man like some men I have met in my own lifetime and, alas, like I myself have sometimes been, who had a penchant for talking about God's complete control over the salvation of men in ways so unrestrained and so unqualified and so uncaring about other truth about God and man that he gave offense to everybody. He actually had to be rebuked by the great Synod of Dort for his incautious language and told to be more careful about the sensibilities of Christian hearts. Maccovius seemed to love to rub the truth of God's sovereignty in people's faces. The Bible never does that. But the Bible never backs away from this truth either, as we see here in John 12. God could have just left us to wonder how it was possible for the people who saw Jesus' miracles to continue to reject him as the Messiah and the Savior. But he wanted us to know that he had hardened their hearts. He wanted us to face the implications of that hard and difficult truth. It is, you see, a sentinel posted around the cross and around the grace of God. It is the final proof, the inescapable proof that our

salvation is not our doing, not in any part our doing. It is Christ's accomplishment and God's gift to us. We are often told that, of course, in the Bible, but lest we miss the point, we are also told, as here, that it is so completely God's doing that he not only gives it to some, he withholds it from others. *That* is how much salvation is God's work and God's gift to unworthy sinners.

This is a deep doctrine and must be carefully handled. Or, as the Puritans used to put it, one must go first to the grammar school of faith before he attends the university of election and sovereign grace.

For the fact is, taken aback as we may be by the blast of cold air we receive in John 12:38-40, there are things you must appreciate and you must remember and you must take to heart even while you are hearing what the Lord Jesus says so baldly and so emphatically in these difficult verses. Two things, in particular.

I. First, these men whose hearts God hardened so that they would not be saved, deserved to be hardened and deserved to lose their opportunity to gain eternal life.

This is the point with which this paragraph begins in v. 37. These people literally had no excuse. They had heard the truth from the lips of a perfect man. That truth had been confirmed by the most stupendous works of supernatural power – works they had never seen before, works such as you and I have never seen. No one doubted the works themselves, no one who had seen them. They all knew that he had raised Lazarus from the dead, but they would not bend the knee to him. They would not. They were too proud. They were unwilling to admit they needed such a salvation as he came to bring. They resented the summons to surrender their lives to him. And, as all the Gospels make perfectly clear, they were terribly jealous of his power and his popularity.

And the Lord Jesus returns to the same point in his conclusion in vv. 47-50. These people heard the truth and still they would not believe it. It is not that they could not have believed it. Eventually that became the case, but their hearts were deadened by the Lord and their eyes blinded by him *because they themselves had so long turned away from the truth* that was staring them in the face!

In John 9:39 we heard the Lord say, "For judgment I came into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Who are those who see who then became blind? In the Gospels "those who see" are always those who think themselves wise and righteous, the proud who were sure that they knew the truth and that their lives were good enough for God. They didn't need a Redeemer to die for them. They didn't need a forgiveness that only the suffering and death of the Son of God could purchase for them. It was their pride that kept them from bending their knee to Jesus Christ, admitting their great need, and pleading with him for his grace and salvation, as so many did during those three years of the Lord's ministry. Both in regard to the Israelites of Isaiah's day and the Jews of Jesus day, God's hardening their hearts was a response to their own stiff-necked rebellion against the grace and truth of God that had been revealed to them. God hardened their hearts because they had first hardened their own hearts. As the Lord said in another place in the prophecy of Isaiah: "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." (65:2).

I don't say, of course, that that takes the mystery away, for surely there are a great multitude of people just as proud and just as stiff-necked whom God has, by his mighty power, drawn to himself, opened their eyes, softened their hearts and given them faith in Christ. The Apostle Paul was long an enemy of Jesus Christ and did all he could to stamp out Christianity, but God called Paul to himself and made him a follower of Jesus Christ. We all, left to ourselves, would be just like these Jews who rejected Jesus Christ in spite of his miracles.

Still, clearly, we are not to disconnect God's hardening of these people here from their stubborn refusal to believe in and to worship the Son of God who had come among them. God hardened them in a choice they had already made, and not only made but persisted in until they were sermon proof and sickness proof and miracle proof.

Savonarola, the great Italian reformer of the 15th century, was also executed by religious leaders who were offended by his pointing out their terrible sins and errors. He once said in a sermon that many a gospel hearer had "become like unto a rook on a steeple, that, at the first stroke of the church bell, takes the alarm and hath fear, but then, when accustomed to the sound, perches quietly on the bell, however loudly it be rung..." [In J.S. Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 184] That is what had happened to this people. At first amazed and startled at Christ's miracles and at the authority of his teaching, they had nevertheless refused to acknowledge him as the Messiah and the Son of God because he did not hesitate to point out their errors, he did not fit into their expectations, and he did not hesitate to summon them to forsake the lives that they were living. He offered them salvation, but he offered it only on God's terms. He offended their pride, in other words. And refusing long enough, becoming used to rejecting the Lord's words and deeds, they could watch the Lord Jesus raise a dead man and never give a second thought to whether he really was the Messiah and the Savior of the world. They just hated him more for making them seem still smaller in comparison. And that utterly inexcusable pride and self-love and unbelief in the teeth of the truth finally, by the judgment of God, earned them the hardening of their hearts, the blinding of their eyes, so that they would never believe. They had their chances, many of them, and they forfeited them all. God has last knocks, says Robert McCheyne. He would come knocking on the door of these hearts no longer.

What a terrible, terrible thing. There are people in this world, alive in this world right now, whom God has already forsaken and will not save. No matter what they will not believe. The best arguments, the most attractive presentations of those arguments, the most beautiful Christian lives, the most dramatic transformation of the lives of their friends by the power and grace of God, will make no impression. God has turned away from them and so they will never turn to him. Without his grace they cannot believe in Jesus Christ and he will not give them his grace. Terrible, and **absolutely just**. *They are receiving not only what they deserve, but what they themselves have repeatedly asked for!* They wished for God to leave them alone – that is what the Jews wanted; they wanted the Son of God to get out of their hair and leave them alone – and that is precisely what he did. What a terrible thing to be a man and not to believe in God who made you or his Son who came into the world to save men from their sins! That is the first thing we must remember. God hardened the hearts of these people as punishment for their hardening their own hearts against him!

II. The second thing we must remember and appreciate in reckoning with this hard statement in vv. 38-40 about the Lord preventing the salvation of these people is that it is no one else but Jesus himself, the Son of God, who spoke these terrible words.

This is the point we made last week from v. 41. Now we apply that truth. Christians through the ages have indulged the idea that God the Father is a harder, more unbending, more demanding person than God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. They have thought, against all the evidence of the Bible, that the Father is harder to please and less inclined to love. But it is not so, of course. It was the Father who sent his Son into the world to save the world. It was the Father who loved us with an everlasting love. But, in any case, the point John is making here, is that it was the Son of God, not the Father, who spoke these hard words to Isaiah the prophet, 700 years before he came into the world as a man. It was Christ himself who hardened their hearts so that they would not turn and be saved. It was Jesus Christ who said that he had blinded their eyes so that they would not recognize the truth.

This same Jesus Christ, who gave his life a ransom for many, who came into the world precisely to suffer and die in the place of his people so that they might be saved. No one can accuse *him* of not loving, of not giving himself completely for the sake of others. No one can accuse him of being unfeeling or uncaring. However hard it may be for us to understand how and why God should say that he has blinded men's eyes and deadened their hearts so that they can neither see nor understand, it comforts us and silences us to realize that it was the Savior himself, the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, the suffering Servant, who first uttered these words to Isaiah and then, 700 years later, applied them to his own generation.

I tell you frankly that texts like this one we are considering this morning disturb me. I wonder what to think about them. I confess to you that I have no relish for such a statement as John makes here about the Lord preventing people from being saved. I fully understand that I am not free to pick and choose what I will believe in the Bible. What is more, I know full well that there is a great deal in life, in this world already, that disturbs me and that I do not understand. Indeed, what troubles me in the Bible is always what I also am troubled by in life. Why do so many refuse to believe? Why are human beings bored or offended by the truth of God, as bright as the noonday sun, but attracted to and willing to believe and even commit their lives to such utter nonsense. More people in Europe today consult psychics than worship in Bible-believing churches! Why has God ordered the life of this world as he has? Why does he not draw more people to faith in Christ his Son? I cannot understand it. I will never understand it. But, I know how small my mind is; I know how sinful I am, how preposterous an idea it is that I should sit in judgment of the ways of Almighty God.

Is it any wonder that we should stand baffled before the ways of God. Is it any wonder that human beings, eaten up by self-love and self-worship, blinded to themselves by their pride as they are, self-deceived as we all are, should find it hard to comprehend the ways of an infinitely holy God, whose purity is like a great and terrible furnace burning with incredible heat at the center of reality. Why the Bible tells us that no one has ever seen or can see the true glory of God. It would destroy him or her. And yet we think, we presume, to tell God what is right and what is wrong! No, that we cannot think and cannot do.

And, particularly, we cannot do it when the person who uttered those terrible words we have been considering this morning was no one else than the Son of God who gave himself to be hung up on the cross of shame and to be tortured there to pay the price of your sins and mine. Oh, I am so glad that the ultimate issue of men's lives lies in *his* hands. Is there anyone we could trust more to do what is right and just and necessary than the Good Shepherd?

You may still think or say that it is unjust for God to choose to save one sinner and pass by another. But it is not! It is not unjust. No man ever receives from God anything else but what he deserves and what he himself has asked for. And God never once turned away any sinner who came to him pleading for life. Is there someone here today who wonders if God would accept him or her? Put him to the test. Christ said, "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." You know that *he, of all people would not lie to anyone about that!* Try him at his word. And if you will not try, it will not be God's fault that you do not. It is your responsibility to come to him, to give answer to the truth about God and you and your sin and salvation that he has revealed to you. It is your responsibility to believe in him and to surrender yourself to him as the Lord. If you will not you have no one to blame for your loss but yourself. You cannot come without his help, I admit that. But that is true of everyone, not just you. Plead with him for your soul and your life. He has promised, the same one who hung on the cross for sinners has promised that "he who comes to me I will never drive away."