

John 12:37-50. The Signs Are Not Enough

If you are already a Christian – what did it take for you to believe in Jesus? What was it that convinced you that he was the Son of God who died on the cross in your place and that he rose again to give eternal life to all who trust in him? What was it that convinced you it was all true?

And if you're not a Christian, what would it take for you to believe in Jesus and become a Christian? Are you waiting for absolute proof of the existence of God? Would you like to see Jesus appear and do a miracle before your very eyes? Do you, like Thomas the disciple, need to put your finger into the nail holes in Jesus' hand before you would believe? Is that what it would take for you to become a Christian?

I've met many people who would say they would need something exactly like that if they were to believe in Jesus. But I want to say that if that's the case for you, then you are demanding a level of proof to faith in Jesus that you don't insist on in other areas of your life.

Until two months ago I had never been to New Zealand – but I didn't doubt it existed. I've met people who said they came from there, I'd seen pictures, I'd watched video clips, and yet not once did I think those things had been fabricated – that the people were lying or that the photos and video clips were just clever CGI.

And yet when it comes to Jesus so many people refuse to believe unless they see things first hand. And if you are waiting for a miraculous event to convince you of the truth of Jesus let me say two quick things. Firstly, it's almost certainly not going to happen (at least not in this life and by then it may be too late.) And secondly, the signs would still not be enough. Even if you saw all those things there is no guarantee you would believe.

How do I know that? Because, as verse 37 tells us, that's exactly how many of the people at the time of Jesus responded to him.

Since Jesus began his public ministry some 3 ½ years or so before the events in this chapter, Jesus had travelled the length and breadth of the country preaching to huge crowds, healing countless numbers of sick people, raising dead people back to life, and performing various other kinds of miracles that pointed to his true identity as God's anointed King. And yet, verse 37. *"Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him."* They were first-hand witnesses of all that Jesus did and yet the signs were not enough.

Now of course there was no lack of belief in Jesus' existence- because he was there before their eyes. They spoke with him, touched him, ate with him. But neither did they doubt that Jesus actually did perform these miracles things. No one thought Jesus was a fraud, or that these sick people he healed were not really ill or the dead people he raised from the dead weren't really dead. Even his enemies acknowledged Jesus' power – they simply attributed it to evil. Their lack of belief wasn't in Jesus as a person or his miraculous works – their lack of belief was in Jesus' claim to be the Messiah – God's anointed King – God's representative on earth. And so they rejected his teaching and opposed him every step of the way. The signs were not enough.

And as verse 38 makes clear, this is exactly what the prophet Isaiah predicted would happen. Isaiah was God's spokesman some 600 years before Jesus and he prophesied that when God's Messiah came, the suffering servant, the one who would give his life as a ransom for many, he would be rejected by the vast majority of the Jewish people. The Jewish leaders may have known of these words that pointed to the Messiah's coming, they may have heard his teaching and seen his miraculous signs, but the signs were not enough.

John goes on to give us a reason for their rejection of Jesus in verses 39 to 40 but they do need a little unpacking.

These words come from Isaiah chapter 6 just after Isaiah had seen a vision of the glory of God. In that vision Isaiah was so overcome by the sight of God in all his holiness and power and might and majesty (and as John makes clear here in verse 41 that included seeing Jesus' glory) that he fell to his knees in shame about his own sinfulness. But

after his sin had been dealt with he heard a call from the Lord for a messenger to go and tell of his good news. And Isaiah says that he would volunteer and go. And who wouldn't, having seen what he had seen.

But then Isaiah got the bad news – that although he had a message of wisdom and hope and encouragement to bring to the people, a message that God was ready to forgive his sinful people if they would turn to him, they would not listen. In fact, it seems that by going to them with this message their rejection of God became more deeply ingrained. And that's what happened. As Isaiah preached the hearts of the people became more hardened than they were before. And I think John is taking us back to Isaiah chapter 6 to help us to understand the situation at the time of Jesus. Jesus had come with God's wonderful message of hope and forgiveness but the vast majority of the people turned their backs on him and refused to believe.

But if you look down at verse 40 you'll see that Isaiah explains that the reason people would not believe was because God blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts.

And I suspect the question we want to ask is this: Is that fair? Did those who rejected Jesus have no chance of believing? Because if so, how can it be right for God to judge them for rejecting him. If I tie your hands behind your back and then get terribly offended that you don't give me a hug when I come into the room, it's not fair is it! I have stopped you doing something that you might have done. Is that what's going on here?

No – absolutely not.

In verse 47 Jesus explains that he had come '*to save the world*', to bring, as verse 46 explains, '*everyone into the light*' and to give them, verse 50, '*eternal life*'. And remember where we are heading. Jesus is about to give his life on the cross so that sinful people, people like you and me, people who deserve God's wrath and eternal rejection might be forgiven. What's more the Bible is clear that God never rejoices in sending people to hell. He wants everyone to come to Jesus and be saved. Everyone! So when Isaiah speaks about God blinding their eyes and hardening their hearts God isn't callously closing the door on those who might have come to him.

By the time Isaiah had this message from God the people of Israel had repeatedly rejected God's offers of help and salvation. He had told them the right path to take and they had turned away from him time and time again. And one of the ways God judges us is to give us what we want. And sadly, like the people at the time of Jesus, like the vast majority of the people in our town and country today, when we demand that God gets out of our way he does exactly that. And slowly and gradually he closes the door behind him. So when the Bible speaks of the Lord blinding eyes and hardening hearts he does so because that is what people want.

But there is some good news here too – if you think hard enough about it. Because it is the Lord who hardens hearts it means that he is also able to soften them. Friends, there is healing and freedom and hope and joy available in Jesus Christ for all people who cry out for forgiveness, no matter how long they have been turning away from him. That's why we should continue to pray for our unbelieving parents and spouses and brothers and sisters and friends and neighbours, no matter how many times they have said no to God.

The signs were not enough to make the people believe in Jesus. And when we reject God and turn away from him he gives us what we want and that has the effect of our eyes being blinded and our hearts hardened to the truth.

And at this point it all sounds rather bleak doesn't it. After three years of public ministry, of mighty miracles and of monumental preaching, all Jesus has to show for it are 12 disciples and a larger, if not huge, band of loyal followers.

But that isn't all – verses 42 to 43 talks about some of the leaders who believed in him. It says there are '*many people*', some of whom were among the ruling elite of the day, who did believe in Jesus. And remember what that word '*believe*' means: it means that they acknowledged that the source of Jesus' power and authority to teach and heal came from God. It means that they believed Jesus to be the Messiah, God's anointed King, God in human flesh, walking on the earth.

But there is a 'but', isn't there. It's halfway down verse 42 – *"but because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God."*

And the question this raises is this: is this kind of belief enough? Is it okay to believe that Jesus is the son of God but to remain secret disciple like these leaders? Or to put it into our context: Is it okay to read your Bible and pray at home and be active in the church on Sundays but never say anything about your faith at work or to your friends or talk about Jesus outside of these four walls? Is that enough? Is that level of belief okay? I come across many people who call themselves Christians, who would say they believe in Jesus, but whose their faith has zero impact on their lives and who never speak of their faith. For them faith in Jesus is a personal thing. They may not be afraid of the Pharisees, but they are afraid of being laughed at, of losing influence, of losing friends, or of losing control over their lives that they keep quiet. Is that okay?

But imagine we weren't talking about the Christian faith but instead were talking about marriage. Do you think it would be okay for a person to be secretly married and never to speak about their spouse at work or amongst their friends? At work, on business trips, out and about in the community they would behave just like a single person. But when they got home – well there they they'd be a loving husband or wife. Would that be okay? I don't think any of us would say that would be fine. It would be a terrible thing to do. So how can we possibly imagine that being a secret follower of Jesus is all right? How can we possibly say that refusing to speak about the one who gave his life on the cross for us is acceptable?

And that's certainly how the Bible explains things. In Luke 9:26 Jesus says that if anyone is ashamed of him that he will be ashamed of them when they stand before the father in heaven. And I think it's telling that these Jewish leaders who believed in Jesus refused to acknowledge him *'because they loved human praise more than praise from God.'* That tells me that although they may have had an intellectual acceptance of who Jesus was, they were not prepared to let that truth impact on their hearts or their lives.

And this brings us to our final point today – what does it mean to believe in Jesus? What are the signs that we are truly his?

There are, as we've seen already, some facts we need to accept as true if we are to be a Christian. A Christian is someone who believes that Jesus was a real person in human history and that during a short period of his life he went around teaching great crowds, healing the sick, calming storms, raising the dead and forgiving sins. Christians believe too that although he lived a perfect moral life, he was rejected by the Jews and handed over to the Romans who crucified him on the cross. Christians believe that Jesus died and was buried, but that on the third day he rose again, physically and that he appeared to his disciples and hundreds of others over a period of 40 days before ascending to Heaven.

And Christians also believe the implications of those things. Again we've touched on some of these already. Christians believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be – that he is the Son of God, the long promised Messiah, the rightful King of the world. In verse 44 Jesus makes the link between him and God the Father: *"When someone believes in me, they do not believe in me only but in the one who sent me."* That verse explains that to believe in Jesus is to accept the God of the Bible because when we look at the character of Jesus we see the character of God in absolute clarity and perfection. And conversely it means that when we reject Jesus we are also rejecting God. To believe in Jesus is to acknowledge his true identity as divine.

But even that is not enough. Satan himself has no trouble believing all of those things- and he certainly isn't a Christian!

No, a Christian is someone who believes the truth about Jesus, who acknowledges his true identity, and is then willing, through repentance and faith to obey Jesus as Lord. So look down at verse 46. Jesus says that he came into the world as a light so that no one who believes in him should stay in darkness. The point is clear isn't it, if Jesus is

God, and if we have turned to him for rescue, then we need also to obey him as Lord. Real belief involves following where Jesus leads; listening to his teaching and putting it into practice. Becoming a Christian isn't just an intellectual thing or a spiritual thing, it is an everyday thing! And in verses 47 and following, Jesus is pretty blunt about the prospects for those who say they are his and who hear his commands but who do not do what he says. He says he won't need to condemn them on the last day, because actually they have already condemned themselves.

To be given a driving licence these days you have to pass a theory test and a practical test, the idea being that you not only know how to drive a car but the laws of the road. Now imagine someone who passed both their test but who then flouted all those laws. They'd park wherever they wanted, drive as fast as they could, never signal at junctions and ignore red lights or rights of way. And when that person ended up in court, as they would do before too long, there would be no need for a brilliant prosecutor to make the case. The evidence of their wrong choices would be enough to convict them. And that's the point Jesus is making here. If we say we believe in Jesus but ignore his words and reject his commands it's as if we are passing judgement on ourselves. If the evidence of our lives show that we have rejected Jesus as our King then he will reject us.

Being a disciple of Jesus, as we heard in the baptism vows earlier, includes understanding the truth of Jesus with our minds, accepting who Jesus is in our heart and soul but it also includes living lives of obedience to the one we say we have turned to as our saviour and our Lord. That is how we show our faith. That is how we show we believe in Jesus.

Now I don't know how that makes you feel? Perhaps it makes you feel rather guilty because although you would call yourself a Christian, perhaps you've even been connected with the church for many years, you know you haven't lived like that. If so, let me give you some hope and a way out of your predicament.

Amongst those Pharisees who would not openly acknowledge their faith in Jesus there were some who eventually summoned up the courage to do so, not least Nicodemus who spoke up for Jesus amongst the Pharisees and Joseph of Arimathea who went openly to Pilate and asked Jesus' body be placed in his tomb. At this point in time those secret believers were scared and more interested in the praise of people, but they changed. And if you read the book of Acts you'll see that after Jesus was raised from the dead many of the Jewish hierarchy became Christians.

So whilst in the past you may have hardened your heart towards God and he allowed you to walk that way, today is a day of salvation when you can turn to him and receive his forgiveness. Whilst in the past you might have kept your head down and denied your faith in public to protect yourself or your ego, today is a day of salvation when you can say sorry to God and start over again. Whilst in the past you might have tried to put Jesus in a 'Sunday only' box so he could never become Lord of your life, but today is a day to repent and start over and to commit yourself afresh to serve the Lord who loves you and who gave his life for you. There will come a day when it is too late for us, but that day is not today. Today is a day of salvation. Today we can come to God and ask for his forgiveness for not living as we should, and be sure of his complete forgiveness and to receive his Spirit's help to change.

Being a disciple of Jesus is often difficult. In our country it is becoming far tougher to stand up for Jesus and be open and bold about sharing our faith. I know that. That's why little Hannah will need the support and encouragement of her parents and godparents and the wider church family so that she not only grows in her understanding and knowledge of Jesus but so she can come to know Jesus personally and then live out her life as a disciple of Christ.

And that is always the best path to take because the commands of God lead ultimately to eternal life in God's perfect creation. What's more, living an obedient life, a cross-centred life, a Jesus-focussed life in this world is actually the way to enjoy the blessed life, joy-filled and peace-filled life that is our right as disciples of Christ. Let's not let our fear of other people or our desire to be liked rob us of something as glorious as the life in all its fullness that Jesus came to bring. Let's believe in him with our heads; let's accept who he is in our hearts and let's follow him with our lives. That is what it means to believe in Jesus. Is that where you are today? I hope so. And if not – the Lord stands at the door and knocks. Will you answer? Will you believe? Will you follow? I hope and pray you will.