



Text: John 12:36b-43<sup>1</sup>

Series: *Life in His Name ...* The Message of John's Gospel

Title: Part 27 – The Problem of Unbelief

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Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

Sharing the message of Jesus with an unbelieving world can be very discouraging. When something like the Gospel is so precious to you that you believe the whole world needs to hear it and believe it, it can be frustrating and not a little devastating when people express little or no interest in what you have to say about Jesus.

You begin to wonder: What's wrong? Is them or is it me? Jesus is so wonderful and what he wants to do for people is so enriching that we begin to wonder: Is there something wrong in the way I'm speaking about him? Am I not clear enough? Do I not know enough? We sometimes begin to think: If only I knew more about Jesus and could express it more eloquently, then people would listen to what I say and respond to it and come to believe in him.

To that I would say: Maybe, but probably not.

The text we have this morning tells us that we can be as eloquent as an angel, as knowledgeable about the Gospel as an apostle and people will still not believe it. There is something at work in bringing people to believe in Jesus that is totally outside of our control and we need to remember that every time we set out share Jesus with someone.

I'm reading this morning from John's Gospel, chapter twelve, beginning at verse thirty six and reading through to verse forty-three. This is God's holy, inspired and authoritative Word.

**When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. <sup>37</sup> Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, <sup>38</sup> so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" <sup>39</sup> Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." <sup>41</sup> Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.**

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**<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; <sup>43</sup> for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.**

Our text this morning begins a bit abruptly with a reference to Jesus hiding himself after saying some things to the people. Of course, John is referring to Jesus' declaration in John 12, verse 23...

**“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” John 12:23**

...and to the teaching that followed from that declaration about how Jesus was to be glorified through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. For those of us who understand and believe that through his death on the cross Jesus bore our punishment for sin, the cross is a glorious symbol of forgiveness and mercy. For those of us who understand and believe that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is our hope for life beyond death, the cross becomes a glorious sign of hope. But those who do not believe these things, the cross is an emblem of heroic failure at best and a symbol of rejection and shame at worst.

In John's Gospel this is the end of Jesus' public teaching ministry. From now, every teaching he offered would be open only to his close circle of disciples. The next few days, as Jesus prepared for the cross, his teaching was focused on preparing his disciples for his death and for what would follow after for them. The verses we read this morning form the conclusion to John's presentation of public teaching ministry of Jesus and they could be summarized this way...

**The hour has come for the Son of Man to be rejected ...  
... in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary!**

At the very beginning of his Gospel, John prepared us for this “hour” in Jesus' life and ministry. He wrote...

**“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” John 1:10-11**

While there were many over the course of his ministry who came to believe in him, there were many more that rejected him. But their rejection of him came in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Jesus came as the fulfillment of God's promise to the people of Israel to send them a king who would reign on the historic throne of King David, the ancient king of Israel. He was the Christ, the anointed One, sent from God. His entire life and teaching were focused on declaring this reality, but after years of work,



after years of teaching and after performing miracle upon miracle, many refused to believe in him. As John wrote...

**“Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him” John 12:37**

What the other Gospel writers referred to as “miracles,” John referred to as “signs” in his Gospel. Out of the many wonderful, miraculous acts that Jesus performed throughout his life, John selected a specific list of “sign” miracles that pointed to Jesus’ identity as the promised king sent from God. John tells us in his purpose statement for his Gospel...

**“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:30-31**

Bible scholars down through the years have identified **seven key “signs”** that John recorded that pointed to Jesus identity as “the Christ, the Son of God.” John doesn’t number them all, but he does identify the first two signs and that initial numbering sequence sets off the search for the rest of his list. John identifies the first sign that points to Jesus’ identity.

### **Sign #1 ... Jesus Turned Water into Wine John 2:1-11**

Jesus was attending the wedding of a relative when the couple ran out of wine for the celebration. Jesus’ mother, also attending the wedding, informed Jesus of the couple’s need, assuming that he would do something. He told the servants of the household to fill six large stone water jars with water, each jar holding about thirty gallons of water. And he turned the 180 gallons water into the best wine the guests had ever tasted!

John wrote...

**“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.” John 2:11**

How was this event, as miraculous as it was, a “sign” that pointed to Jesus the Christ? The prophecies of the Old Testament predicted that when the Messiah, the King of Israel, came the harvests would be so abundant that the hills would drip with wine. Isaiah promised it. He prophesied that...

**“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.” Isaiah 25:6**



Amos promised it. He wrote...

**“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.”**  
**Amos 9:13**

And the prophet Joel wrote about the day of the Messiah:

**“And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water;”** Joel  
**3:18**

When Jesus turned those six stone jars into wine, he was creating a “sign” that pointed to his identity as the promised Messiah of Israel. Each jar could hold between 20 & 30 gallons of water – that would make between 120 to 180 gallons of wine! The hills of Galilee dripped with wine that day! The Messiah’s glory was revealed! A sign was raised pointing to Jesus.

### **Sign #2 ... Jesus Healed an Official’s Son** **John 4:46-54**

The story is simple, and heart-rending. A desperate father travels twenty miles to ask Jesus to come and heal his dying boy. “Sir,” he begged, “come down before my child dies.” (John 4:49) Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” (v.50) And from twenty miles away, at that very moment, the boy was healed simply because Jesus had spoken the word. John tells us...

**“This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.”** John 4:54

Remember John’s purpose in the Gospel: that those who believe in Jesus “may have life in his name.” Here for the first time in the Gospel, but not for the last (cf Lazarus, chapter 11), we see Jesus actually give life to someone. In the story that immediately precedes this one in John’s Gospel we read that Jesus had told a woman near a well in Samaria that if she believed in him he would give her “eternal life” (John 4:14). And now we watch as Jesus actually gives life to a deathly ill little boy. You see John includes the story of the healing of this boy to demonstrate that Jesus has the power to give life, and not just physical life, but also eternal life, to those who believe in him. This “sign” points to the truth that John declared about Jesus at the very beginning of his Gospel that...

**“In him was life and that life was the light of men.”** John 1:4



The rest of the signs aren't number consecutively but the very next healing that John records is generally accepted as the third "sign."

**Sign #3 ... Jesus Heals a Man on the Sabbath  
John 5:1-17**

Jesus came to a pool in Jerusalem on the Sabbath day that was reputed to have healing properties. Of the many invalids gathered around it that day, Jesus healed one man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. But it was the Sabbath day, and according to the opinion of the Jewish leaders, unless the healing was necessary to preserve life, healing on the Sabbath was a violation of God's Law that forbid work on the Sabbath day.

But even the religious leaders of Jesus' day recognized that God violated his own Sabbath law. If God did not work on the Sabbath, then the universe and all life in it would cease to exist to moment he stopped his work of sustaining His creation. So when the religious leaders attacked Jesus for violating the Sabbath law, Jesus invoked the divine prerogative of working on the Sabbath day and said to them...

**"My Father is working until now, and I am working." John 5:17**

His critics knew exactly what Jesus was saying. His healing was a "sign" that pointed to his identity as the Son of God. And John noted...

**"This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." John 5:18**

They wanted to kill him, not worship him! They never stopped to ask: Who is it that could heal a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years? They never stopped to read the sign. They just set out to kill him.

**Sign #4 ... Jesus Fed Over 5000 with Just Five Loaves & Two Fish  
John 6:1-14**

A large crowd had been following Jesus because they saw the "signs" that he had been doing in the healing of the sick. (John 6:2) The crowd followed Jesus into a remote place where food to feed them could not be found. There were 5000 men in the crowd, plus women and children, so well over 5000 mouths needed to be fed. One small boy had brought five loaves of barley bread and two fish for his own lunch. Jesus took those meager resources, gave thanks to God for them, broke them and handed the pieces to his disciples. They took them to give out to the crowd and when all was said and done, everyone was fed AND there were twelve baskets of fragments of bread and fish left over!



**“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’” John 6:14**

But many people ate the bread but never read the “sign.” Jesus said...

**“Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” John 6:26**

Jesus reminded the people that when their ancestors travelled through the wilderness on their way from Egypt to the land of Promise God had provided them with a miraculous bread to eat. The bread, which was called manna, would appear on the ground every morning. It was “bread from heaven” (6:32) and Jesus helped these people read the sign he had planted by pointing to himself as the true “bread from heaven.” “I am the bread of life,” he told them. (6:35)

But when Jesus started to teach them that if they wanted to taste of the eternal life that he offered they were going to have eat his flesh and drink his blood, they turned away. They knew that Jesus wasn’t asking them to engage in cannibalism; they knew that when he spoke about “eating his flesh” that he was really speaking about “believing” in him. But they also knew that he meant that the free bread train had come to an end. And what they really wanted was bread for their stomachs not life for their souls, and so great numbers of people quit following him. (6:66) And Jesus, recognizing a spiritual principle at work in the crowd’s increasingly cool response to him, said...

**“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” John 6:44**

Keep this Scripture in mind because we’ll return to this insight at the end.

The identity of the fifth sign is sometimes debated, but I offer you...

### **Sign #5 ... Jesus Walked on the Water John 6:16-21**

Imbedded in the story of the feeding of the 5000 is this brief moment where Jesus reveals something wonderful to his disciples. They were crossing the Sea of Galilee. Jesus wasn’t with them in the boat. It was dark, they were miles from shore and a wind came up and the boat began to be tossed. Suddenly, in the dark and storm, Jesus came to them, walking on the water. The disciples were frightened but Jesus said...

**“It is I; do not be afraid.” John 6:20**

He got into the boat and continued the journey with them.



“Walking on water” has become a kind of cultural figure of speech to describe acts that are exceptional. Eddy Money, Neil Diamond and Aerosmith, and possibly others, have used that phrase as a title for songs about the demands of love – nobody can walk on water so don’t expect it of me! Nobody can walk on water – well, almost nobody!

We need to be careful to see what Jesus was doing here. “Walking on water” wasn’t just a neat way to get around. Jesus was declaring his identity to his disciples through this act. He was raising a sign. The Old Testament icon, Job, declared his faith in God with these words...

**“He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.”  
Job 9:8**

Who can “walk on water”? Only God can. And if he can do that, what can’t he do?

### **Sign #6 ... Jesus Healed a Man Born Blind John 9:1-7**

As he was walking near the temple one day Jesus saw a man begging who had been blind from birth. Jesus made some mud by spitting on the ground and then he took that mud and “anointed” the man’s eyes with it and told him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. When the man did so, he could see, for the first time in his life!

If you survey the healing miracles of Jesus you’ll find that he healed more blind people than any other physical ailment. Why? Blindness may well have been a serious health issue in Jesus’ day but I think there’s a more Biblically based reason for his focus on the blind.

In several places in his prophecy, the prophet Isaiah declared that the work of the coming Messiah was to open the eyes of the blind. One of the best examples is one that Jesus chose to highlight. One day when Jesus was asked to read the Scripture in the synagogue in his home town, he chose this reading from the sixty-first chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah...

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Luke 4:18-19 (quoting Isaiah 61:1-2)**

The man who was healed declared his faith in Jesus: “Lord, I believe,” he said. (John 9:38). But the religious leaders, and even the man’s own parents, would



not believe in Jesus. The sign was planted; some read it and believed; others read it and rejected Jesus.

But perhaps the greatest of all the signs that Jesus raised to his identity as Messiah was the last one that John recorded. We've already encountered a sign in which Jesus gave life to a dying boy but this sign tops that!

### **Sign #7 ... Jesus Raised Lazarus from the Dead John 11:1-44**

Jesus' friend Lazarus was dead. Jesus came to Bethany, Lazarus home town, four days after Lazarus had died. Lazarus was in his tomb. Decomposition had set in. Jesus asked that the stone blocking access to Lazarus tomb be rolled away. Lazarus' sister, Martha, pled with Jesus not to have the stone rolled away from the opening of the tomb because, she said, "by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." (11:39) There were witnesses around her who had shared her grief for four days. They, too, knew that Lazarus was truly dead.

But the stone was rolled away and Jesus stood at the open mouth of Lazarus' tomb and...

**"he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.'" (11:43)**

And Lazarus did! He walked out, alive! And John tells us...

**"Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done." John 11:45-46**

John tells us that based on this information about the raising of Lazarus, the Pharisees, "made plans to put [Jesus] to death." (11:53) But what reveals the depth and twistedness of their hostility to Jesus is something that John tells us later. Apparently, this sign was drawing attention to Jesus and people were coming to believe in him.

**"So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus." John 12:10-11**

Rather than read the sign and follow them to belief in Jesus, these men chose to tear down and burn the sign. And they were not alone. The crowds that had once flocked to hear Jesus and had fed on the bread in the wilderness and had welcomed with singing into Jerusalem, now turned on him and demanded, with the authorities, the death of Jesus.



Were Jesus' signs clear? Yes, they were.  
Did they fully declare his identity? Yes, they did.  
Were they persuasive? Yes and no. Many believe, many did not.

I've given you this quick summary of Jesus' sign ministry to make this simple point simple...

***Bringing people to belief in Jesus does not ultimately depend on how persuasively we proclaim the Gospel message.***

Please hear me: that does not mean that we shouldn't be clear in our Gospel proclamation. Of course, we should be clear. We should be faithful to Jesus and to His Gospel by being accurate in our presentation of it. There is truth that people need to believe in order to be saved. John tells us that they must "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (20:31) in order for them to receive eternal life. They need to believe that Jesus Christ is God, come into the world as a human being, who gives them eternal life through his death and resurrection. They need to believe that he died on the cross to bear their punishment for their sin and that he rose from the dead to give them the promise of eternal life. Paul summarizes the essential core of the Gospel in his letter to Corinthians...

**"I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures..." 1 Corinthians 15:3-4**

There are any number of ways we can share this core Gospel truth ... the Bridge Illustration, the Roman Road, the Four Spiritual Laws, Christianity Explored, Christianity Explained, The Stranger on the Road, Steps to Peace With God, the Alpha Program, the Two Ways to Live diagram, the Wordless Book, Evangelism Explosion ... there are countless numbers of methods available to us to help us share the story of Jesus death and resurrection and to invite people to believe in Jesus and I'm grateful for them all!

But bringing people to believe in Jesus is not ultimately dependent upon the how persuasively we explain the Gospel nor upon the methodology we use to present it. Jesus presented overwhelming evidence of his identity as Messiah but many people in his day rejected him and many people in our time still reject him as "the Christ, the Son of God" in whom alone is found life despite our best efforts to present it clearly and compellingly.

If method and persuasive argument aren't the crucial issues in bringing people to faith in Jesus then what is the crucial issue? Despite the presence of Jesus' compelling signs many did not believe in him and John reached back to Isaiah the prophet for an explanation of why that was the case. John wrote...



**“Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them. Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.” John 12:38-41**

John saw in Isaiah’s words a principle that applied to Jesus’ situation. The prophet Isaiah had been commissioned by God to bring a message of judgment to the people of Israel but he was forewarned by God that his message would not be received. Transported by the Spirit into God’s presence, Isaiah wrote...

**“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!’” Isaiah 6:1-3**

And Isaiah cried...

**“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Isaiah 6:4**

God had brought Isaiah into his presence because the message he wanted Isaiah to deliver was a hard one. Isaiah wrote...

**“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” Isaiah 6:8-10**

John saw a parallel with the people of Jesus’ day. They had heard and seen Jesus’ message but their eyes had been blind and their hearts had been hard to the message of Jesus’ signs. And in John’s experience and in the experience of believers down through the centuries we’ve seen the same hardness and blindness as the Gospel is shared. But then suddenly, eyes are opened and hearts are softened and people come to faith in Jesus ... how?

What brings people to see the glory of Jesus?



Notice John's observation:

**“Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.”  
John 12:41**

Whose glory did Isaiah see in the throne room of heaven? In his prophecy, Isaiah only refers to seeing the glory of the LORD of hosts, the God of heaven and earth. But who does John say that Isaiah saw? The only “him” that John is speaking about is Jesus. You see that in the very next verse where he says that many of the authorities came to believe “in him.” (12:42) He's clearly speaking about Jesus.

What John is saying is that the Spirit of God transported Isaiah into the throne room of heaven and there gave Isaiah a glimpse of the glory that Jesus had with the Father from before the beginning of time (John 17:5) The Spirit of God enabled Isaiah to see the glory of Jesus.

What enables people to see the glory of Jesus is not our evangelist methods or the clarity of our Gospel presentation; what enables people to see Jesus is the same Holy Spirit who transported Isaiah into the throne room of heaven and enabled him to see Jesus' glory.

***Bringing people to belief in Jesus depends on the sovereign movement of the Spirit of God to open their eyes to enable them to see him***

Whether we use a simple diagram or a full scale Bible study on the atonement to explain what Jesus did in dying for us on the cross and rising again, the crucial element in bringing people to faith in Jesus is God's work of drawing them to Christ. Remember the verse I asked you to keep in mind? As he watched the crowds miss the significance of the sign he raised by providing them with bread in the wilderness, Jesus said...

**“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” John 6:44**

Yes, let's be prepared to share the Good News of Jesus. Yes, let's use any method that accurately shares the truth of his death and resurrection. Yes, as Peter challenges us, let's always be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you...” (1 Peter 3:15) But let's always remember that it is God who opens eyes to see and enables hearts to believe in Jesus.

So what do we do? We faithfully share the Gospel and we pray! We pray that God moves in their lives. We pray that God draws them to see Jesus. We call



on God to show them his mercy and bring them to believe in Jesus. And then we trust that God is at work doing just that!

John leaves us with hope that God is, in fact, at work drawing people to Jesus even when we can't see it. He wrote...

**“Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” John 12:42-43**

Let me say just three things about what God was doing here in the lives of these “authorities.”

First, these were not secret Christians, they were silent Christians. They believed in Jesus but for social and political reasons they kept quiet about it. They were part of the authority structure of Judaism, they were rabbis and priests, and the cost to them of following Jesus was going to be significant.

Second, they could not remain silent forever. Jesus said...

**“So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 10:32-33**

Third, it looks like their silence ended just a few weeks later. Luke tells us that after the Day of Pentecost...

**“the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” Acts 6:7**

God had been at work drawing them to Jesus and the day came when they openly confessed their faith in him.

My prayer for every one of us who is waiting for someone to believe in Jesus – a family member, a close friend, a co-worker – is that there will come a day when they will become to believe in Jesus and become “obedient to the faith.” Until that day let's continue faithful in pointing them to Jesus and praying that God will draw them in. Amen.

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song:** The Old Rugged Cross
- **Benediction**