

Why Some Believe in Christ and Others Do Not Believe

The character of God should be comforting to every person on planet earth because Scripture says He is holy. He loves everyone, and He never changes. To say God is holy means He never sins or commits evil (1 Peter 1:15-16). Because He loves (John 3:16; 1 John 4:16) means that He always does what is best for us (Philippians 2:1, 4). He loves even His enemies, and these character traits never change (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8). These are just three of His marvelous character traits that should cause us to rejoice when we think of His sovereignty.

Scripture teaches that God is the sovereign ruler of our universe and everything in it, including angels and humans! For God created everything that is invisible and visible (Colossians 1:16). When we were born, He gave us to our parents. He did not ask us to choose our parents, the country in which we would be born, or the color of our eyes or hair. God made those decisions for us. He designed our bodies (Psalm 139:13-16). He made us either a biological male or female as He desired. So we should not be surprised that He knows our thoughts and everything about us (Proverbs 21:2; 24:12; Luke 9:47; 11:17).

He can influence the decisions we make. Proverbs 21:1 tells us that He can turn the hearts of national leaders like water in His hand. Ezra 1:1 says He can motivate us to make or change our decision. He sovereignly decided the year, month, and day we will die (Job 14:1, 5). He raises up nations and tears down nations (Daniel 4:34-35). He pulls down the proud and exalts the humble (1 Peter 5:6). He kills and makes alive (1 Samuel 2:6). Throughout Scripture we are told that God will send us to hell or heaven when we die based on our decision about Christ. He can keep His promises and prophecies because no one can frustrate His plans (Proverbs 16:9; Isaiah 14:27). The message is that God is the all powerful and sovereign ruler. That is an important background to our study which is in John 12:36-50.

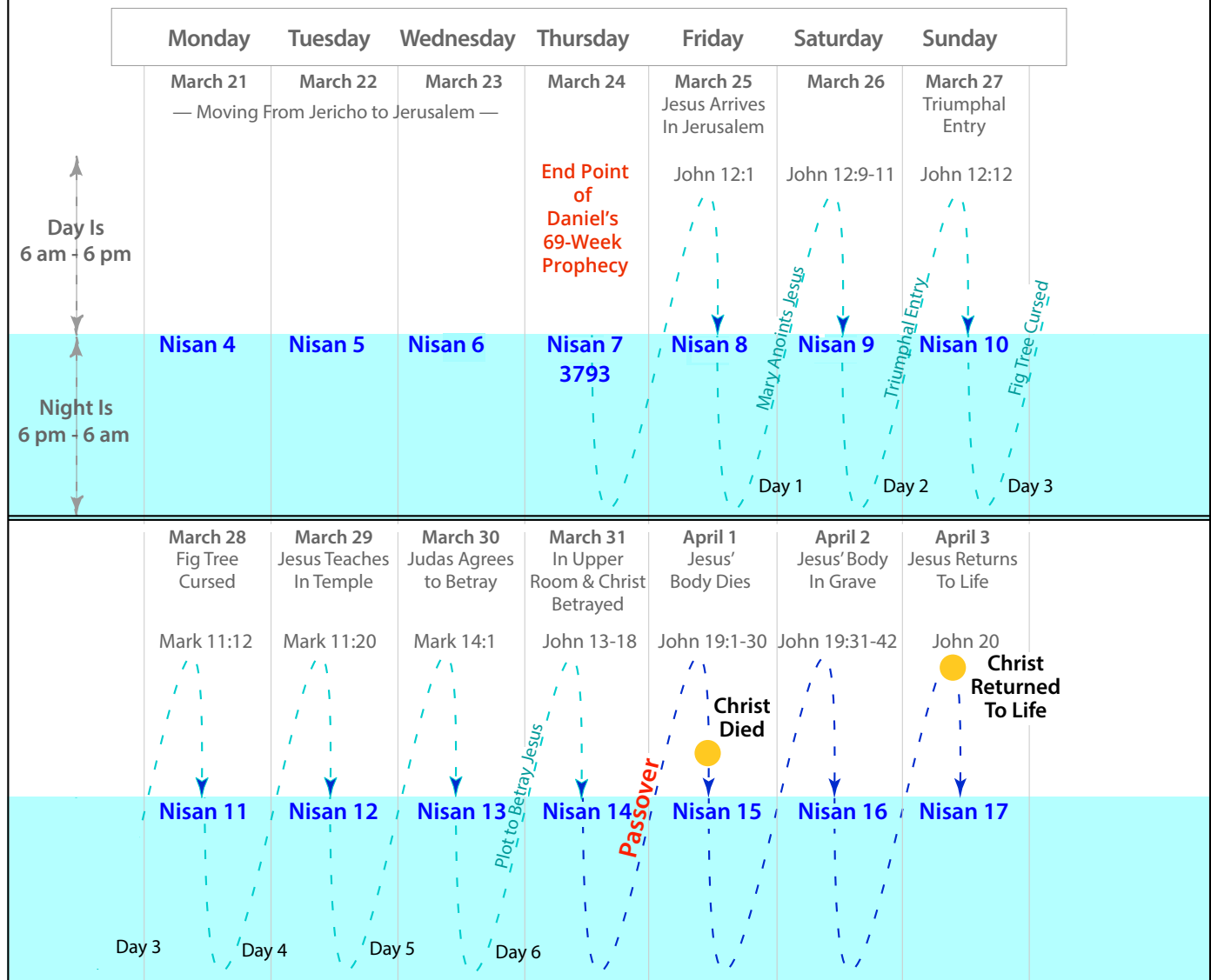


JESUS HIDES FROM THE CROWD. The first verse of our study is John 12:36b

These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them. John 12:36b (NASB)

Immediately we are told that after Jesus had just finished speaking to the crowd, He hid Himself. The day was still Monday, March 28, A.D. 33. The events that are described in this study must have occurred late in the day. For on this day, Jesus had already cursed a fig tree, cleansed the temple, presented the gospel to some Gentiles, and foretold His death on

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the cross.

We are not told why Jesus hid Himself from the crowd, yet the Holy Spirit found it to be important to tell us. It may be that the events of the day had been fatiguing; but most likely, Jesus needed to avoid the crowd and get some rest. Verses 44-50 tell us that Jesus spoke later to a group of people about how to have eternal life. That means Jesus hid from the people only briefly.

RESPONSE TO JESUS WAS MOSTLY UNBELIEF. Our study has two major divisions. The first section (v. 37-43) summarizes the response of the people to Jesus' ministry from its

very beginning. In this section, Jesus does not speak. The comments are given by the Holy Spirit. He tells us that the signs Jesus performed were designed to authenticate His identity. He was both God and the Messiah. The four gospels tell us that Jesus taught about seventy parables and forty-five discourses, including the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the Kingdom Parables (Matthew 13), the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13:1-37; Luke 21:5-36), and the Upper Room Discourse (John 15-16).

The gospels tell us that He performed at least thirty-six miracles. The gospel of John records only seven of the signs

that Jesus performed. The sign at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-12) was Jesus' first sign and His last sign was the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44). The first sign revealed He could create and the last sign taught us that He has control over life and death. When Jesus raised Lazarus (John 11), He revealed that He could raise him by a simple command of His voice. He did not do magic tricks or use chemicals, wands, or dances.

Verse 37 now gives us a summary of how the people responded to His incredible ministry.

But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. John 12:37 (NASB)

Some people believe this verse reveals that the apostle John was disappointed that so few people believed in Jesus after watching and hearing all that Jesus did! But that comment misses the fact that the Holy Spirit moved John to write the verse. The verse is simply an accurate and trustworthy statement of fact. It does not necessarily reveal any attitude of the apostle, but it does reveal the fact that few believed in Him.

Verse 37 gives us two insights. First, I am always surprised when someone says that if a certain person could just see some miracle or sign, that person would believe in Jesus. But the verse reveals that miraculous signs do not cause people to believe in Christ. They do not guarantee hearts will change. For John 20:30-31 says that the signs Jesus performed . . .

. . . have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. John 20:31 (NASB)

But we must notice the word "may." That is, signs do not guarantee that someone will believe in Jesus Christ because the spiritually blind cannot see. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), the rich man thought that if someone were to return from the dead and visit his five brothers, they would repent and believe. But he was told,

If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead. Luke 16:31 (NASB)

The message is simple. We should quote and teach Scripture in order to encourage people to believe in Jesus Christ. They need to hear our God speak.

The second insight is that it is common for church leaders to evaluate the various ministries of their church by the size of the attendance. Even though some leaders understand that higher attendance is not a measure of success and God's blessing, yet their actions reveal that they have not really learned that lesson. So, some pastors adjust their sermons to minimize offending attenders. Some avoid controversial doctrines. Consequently, they emphasize applications and avoid explaining the test. They strive to entertain the crowd with music. They establish programs to create social activities. If only four people were to attend, they would feel that God was not blessing their church and assume they must be doing something wrong. They forget that God told the prophet Ezekiel that no one would repent at his preaching and the nation of Israel would be invaded and Jerusalem destroyed because the people would refuse to stop rebelling. By modern standards of success, not only would Ezekiel be called a failure, but Jesus would be considered a failure too!

They miss the message that Christ sent to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1-4. Revelation 3:1 says the church was spiritually dead. Verse 4 reports that very few people were Christians. Yet, people thought that it was spiritually alive. The church must have been a very large church. Sadly, many believers have a wrong definition of spiritual success. Some people may attend a church like the ancient church in Sardis and think the church is on fire for God. But they do not realize that is not necessarily true.

When Jesus taught, He offended people. When Jesus taught, they heard they were sinners and would be eternally condemned. When Jesus taught, He explained that God is love. So Jesus took on human flesh in order that He could die for our sins and we could have eternal life. Proud people do not like such messages. As a result, few people walk through the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14). Few loved the Good Shepherd. They considered Him to be an evil shepherd. So, verse 37 says only a minority of people believed in Jesus.

HARDENED HEARTS JUDICALLY JUDGED. Why did this occur? The answer is given in verses 38-41. They reveal a

truth that makes some of us feel uncomfortable. Here is verse 38.

This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?" John 12:38 (NASB)

Immediately, the Holy Spirit tells us through the prophet Isaiah that it was prophesied few people would believe in Christ. He literally quotes Isaiah 53:1. The two questions imply very few people had believed. The first question is, "Who has believed our report?" The implied answer is very few. The second question is, "To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" That is, who has seen the power displayed by His signs? The answer is again - very few! That was the fact. So, the prophecy confirmed that the people would and did reject their Messiah in spite of the prophecies He fulfilled, His teachings, and the signs He performed.

Now we wonder why they did not believe. Verse 39 gives us the answer when it says that God had prevented them from believing. Verse 40 quotes Isaiah 6:10 which tells us how God prevented the people from believing.

For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM." John 12:39-40 (NASB)

So, Isaiah 53:1 prophesied that the people would not believe, and Isaiah 6:10 prophesied that God would blind their eyes and harden their hearts so they would not perceive and believe in Christ so as to be saved. The Greek word for a hardened heart is *poroo*. It means "to form a callus or a stone." Their hearts were not soft. They had stony hearts which are hearts that do not understand the Bible and have great difficulty knowing God (Mark 6:51-52). So why did God harden the hearts of the religious leaders and the people? There are two answers to the questions.

First, God hardened their hearts because they had hardened their own hearts first and rejected Jesus during His min-

istry. As a result, God confirmed them in their rejection by blinding them spiritually and hardening their hearts. That is the ultimate punishment. An important example of this is found in Exodus 7:13-14 where we are told that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. He was stubborn.

Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go". Exodus 7:13-14 (NASB)

Notice that a hardened heart is a stubborn one. It refuses to listen and believe. A hard heart is repeatedly stubborn. Then later in Exodus 8:15 and 22, we are told that Pharaoh hardened his heart again. As a result, God hardened his heart repeatedly (Exodus 4:21; 10:1, 20, 27; 14:17). Each time Pharaoh hardened his heart, his heart became progressively harder. Pharaoh had finally and ultimately rejected God, so God confirmed him in his hardness.

Matthew 13:10-15 gives us another example of this principle when we are told that Jesus spoke in parables so that the people would not understand spiritual truth. Why? Verses 14-15 say because their hearts were dull. Then verse 16 adds that Jesus told the disciples they were blessed because they understood. Hard hearts do not understand truth because they have already rejected the truth that was given to them. If they continue rejecting, they reject more easily each time.

The same principle occurs in Romans 1:22-24, 26, 28 in regards to sexual sins. These verses reveal God will give those who finally and ultimately reject Him over to their sin. He removes the restraints that hindered them from committing sin - not prevented them from sinning, but just slowed them down from sinning. They had hardened hearts. Eventually, God just "lets go" and gives them over to their hard hearts. It is divine judgment.

Second, God hardened the hearts of the religious leaders and of the people as part of His divine decree in eternity past to ensure that Christ was crucified on the cross. For Romans 11:11 says that because Israel had sinned by rejecting Christ, salvation was able to come to the Gentiles.

But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to

make them jealous. Romans 11:11 (NASB)

So, John 12:38-40 reveals that God not only planned our salvation, sent Christ to be our sacrifice, but He ensured that Christ would die on the cross for our sins. This is a masterful and insightful passage into the sinfulness of man's evil hearts. Because sinners had ultimately and finally rejected Christ, God was justified in confirming them in their rejection of Christ. It was an act of judicial judgment.

SOFT HEARTS ACCEPT CHRIST. Verse 41 reveals the rejection of Christ was foreknown by the prophet Isaiah himself. He knew it was going to occur.

These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. John 12:41 (NASB)

So Isaiah saw Christ's glory and spoke about Him. 1 Peter 1:10-12 is a fascinating verse for it says the ancient prophets tried to understand the very prophecies that were given to them by the Holy Spirit. The passage says they made careful searches and inquiries.

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things into which angels long to look. 1 Peter 1:10-12 (NASB)

So Isaiah saw the glory of Christ and most likely, just as the other prophets did, he searched the Old Testament Scriptures to know more about Him. I imagine he read the prophecies slowly and seriously. I wonder what he thought when he read chapter 53 of Isaiah? I wonder what he thought about Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6-7 and Micah 5:2-3?

Verse 41 says that Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus. But what does that mean? The answer is given to us in John 1:14, which says that the people saw Christ's glory too! John 2:11 is more specific,

This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him. John 2:11 (NASB)

The signs Jesus performed displayed His glory and revealed He was the Deity. John 11:4, 40 says that God was glorified when Jesus raised Lazarus. When the people saw His miracles and heard His teaching, they saw His glory. Those who had soft hearts saw He was the God-man Himself. But the people with hard hearts did not understand what they saw. That is the result of sin upon a person. But Isaiah saw His glory six hundred years before He arrived and yet believed. But the hard-hearted people who saw Jesus face-to-face did not believe. Their unrepentant sin blinded their eyes.

This is an important lesson for us. We do not need to be eyewitnesses of Jesus in order to see His glory. Isaiah was not an eyewitness, and we do not need to be an eyewitness of Jesus either in order to see the glories of Christ. This means that faith does not depend upon our being an eyewitness of Jesus' miracles and teachings. Distance in time is not the issue. Atheists and unbelievers do not need to see or to hear Jesus in person in order to believe in Jesus. They need to search for the true God and seek His forgiveness.

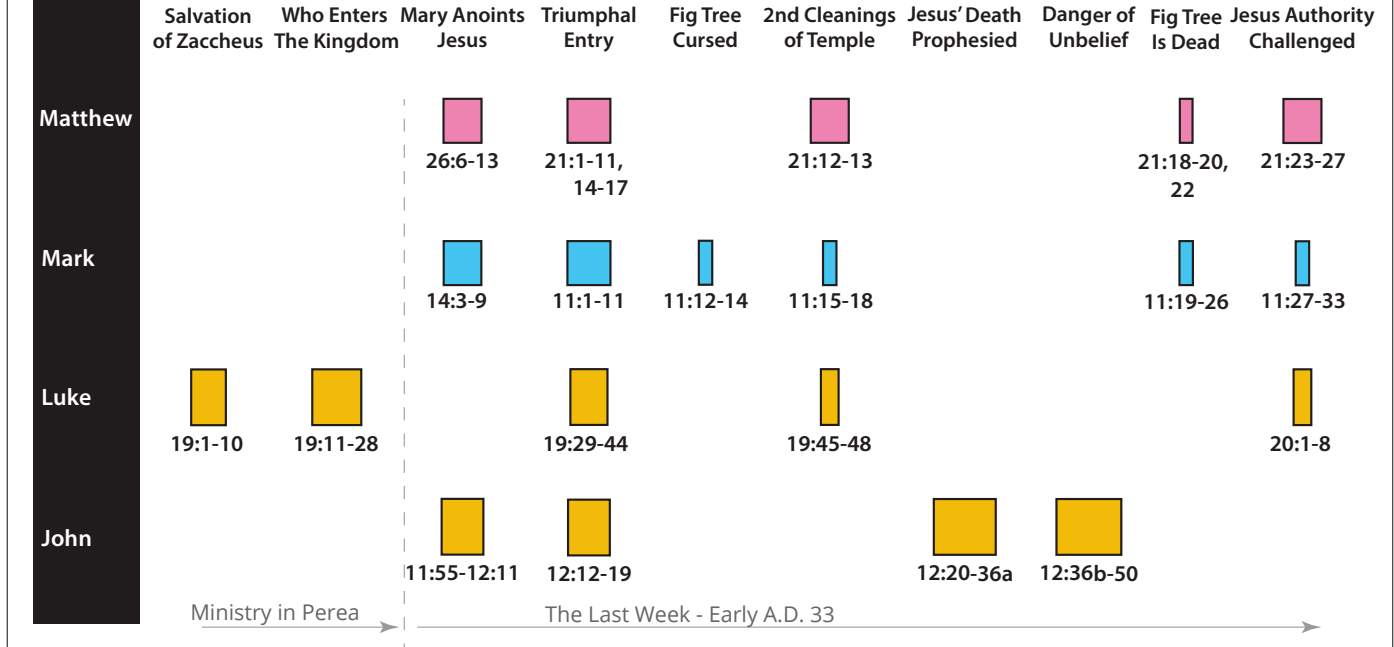
But John 12:42-43 says many of the rulers did believe in Christ.

Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God. John 12:42-43 (NASB).

Many rulers believed in Christ. Verse 43 is important because it helps us to understand the individuals who believed in Christ at the end of His ministry were more concerned about themselves than Christ. So, they played it safe. They did not reveal they were followers of Christ. They were not the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). They were not lights to the world. We could say they hid themselves under a basket (Matthew 5:14-15). They were afraid to reveal that they believed in Jesus. They allowed Christ to be crucified. Yet, we can be thankful that they did not stop the evil proceedings that resulted in Jesus

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becoming the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

THE BENEFITS OF BELIEF. When we come to verses 44-50, we should remember that previously Jesus had left the people and hid Himself (John 12:36). Now we are told Jesus presented the gospel to a crowd of people. As we read how Jesus gave the gospel, it is important to notice that He presented the gospel both positively and then negatively. His presentation of the gospel occurred later in the day, on Monday, March 28, 33 A.D.

Here are verses 44-45,

And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me." John 12:44-45 (NASB)

Jesus' statement is not new information. It is a clear and crisp summary of statements that He had made before (John 8:19; 10:38). Later He would add to His presentation (John 14:9; 15:24). As He shared the gospel, He stated that we cannot separate Him from the Father. To believe in Jesus is to believe in

the Father. To see Jesus is to see the Father. Later in John 14:8-10, Jesus makes a strong statement that anyone who has seen Him has seen the Father. Once again, He claimed to be God Himself. So, believing in Jesus means that a person also believes Jesus is God.

Then Jesus made a statement that reminds us of John 1:5 which reveals that Jesus is the Light, which shines in darkness. But the world did not understand because it is in darkness. He said,

I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness. John 12:46 (NASB)

We have already heard Jesus say, "I am the Light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5). This time He states that He is Light to everyone. He is light to the people who believe in Him and to those who live in darkness.

Throughout the New Testament we are told that Christians are children of Light (Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:12; 1Thessalonians 5:5). Since Jesus is the Light of the world, believers become children of Light when they believe in Him.

The result is believers now understand spiritual truth contained in Scripture (John 1:4, 9), and consequently, what is occurring around us and in the universe (1 Corinthians 2:12-13; 2 Corinthians 4:4-5; Ephesians 5:13). They understand what is truth and what is error. They are no longer blinded by the evil one. As they walk in the Light, they become more righteous. (Ephesians 5:9, 13). Jesus' point is that those who hear and see in Jesus are no longer like a blind person. Finally, believers can see the truth because their lives have been transformed. They are new creatures in Christ who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who now helps them understand spiritual truth and guides them. That is an encouraging and positive reason to believe in Christ.

TRAGEDY OF UNBELIEF. Now Jesus described the tragedy of not believing in Him—the tragedy of rejecting Him.

If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. John 12:47-48 (NASB)

This is a warning! Those who have heard the words of Jesus and do not strive to keep them will *not* be judged by Jesus, but by someone else. There are two important points for us to learn from His statement. First, only believers are those who will want to keep Jesus' words. A desire to please God is a sign someone is a Christian. 1 John 2:3-6 echoes the same truth that believers are those who want to strive to please Jesus. The second point is that Jesus did not come as a judge to condemn us. Instead, He came to save us from our sins (Matthew 1:21; Luke 3:3). He came to warn and to save us. He is like a life guard on the beach. But He came to rescue us from drowning in the guilt of our sins. He came to save everyone, for everyone who is born into this world is drowning in the guilt of their sins. For Jesus Himself said,

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. Luke 19:10 (NASB)

Then in three important statements, Jesus revealed what will happen to the people who reject Him. First, any unbe-

liever who rejects His words and does not obey what He says will not be judged by Jesus. That is not why He came.

Second, Jesus said, "He who rejects Me." He used the present participle tense for rejects (John 12:48). That is, the person whom the Father will judge is the one who continues to reject Jesus. That is, a person can reject Jesus once, twice, three times, a number of times, but the person the Father will judge on the last day is the one who has continued to reject Jesus. They will have hardened hearts due to repeated rejections of Jesus. The Father will be the judge of unbelievers and not Jesus.

Third, the Father will judge them on the last day after they have died. Then there is no opportunity to change their eternal destiny. The tragedy of rejecting Jesus is incredibly serious. It is not reversible after death and the individual must answer to the Father and not to Jesus.

Now Jesus turns our attention to His relationship with the Father. Jesus reminds us that He speaks for the Father. When He speaks, we understand why it is dangerous to reject Jesus' words.

For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. John 12:49 (NASB)

Throughout the gospel of John, we have been told that Jesus came to do the Father's will. Philippians 2:8 tells us that Jesus humbled Himself to the Father. So, the words He spoke were the words the Father had commanded Him to speak. So, the unbeliever will be forced to stand before the Father who sent Jesus to teach us, to do miracles, and to die for our sins. The unbeliever will be forced to listen to the one who told Jesus what to say, and yet they rejected what Jesus said. Imagine having to stand before the Judge Almighty after you rejected His son and refused to believe what He said and did. Jesus had a different approach to the gospel than we do. We sugar coat the gospel because men do not like to like to hear that God might send them to hell. Men like to hear more encouraging reasons for believing in Jesus.

CONCLUSION. Jesus' last comment reminds us of the paradox we have already been taught in this study.

“I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me.” John 12:50 (NASB)

Jesus ended His presentation of the gospel by stating that God the Father commands everyone to believe in Jesus and have eternal life. So woe to the unbeliever who repeatedly rejects Jesus. Eventually God the Father may confirm them in their rejecting by hardening their hearts. Then on the last day, the Father will sentence them to an eternity in hell for rejecting the words that He spoke through Jesus Christ.

But that will not happen to everyone who has come to the Light by believing in Jesus Christ, whom the Father sent. This serious warning was given just days before Jesus became the Savior of the world. So, do you believe in Jesus?