

BELIEVE WITHOUT DELAY

12 ³⁵Jesus said to them, *The light is with you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before the darkness descends upon you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going.* ³⁶While you have the light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of light. When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.

³⁷Even though he had done so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him; ³⁸consequently*, the word of Isaiah the prophet was fulfilled, when he said, "LORD, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" ³⁹For this reason they were not able to believe, because [in another passage] Isaiah says, ⁴⁰"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart; in order that they should not see with their eyes or perceive with their heart and turn, and I would heal them." ⁴¹Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.

⁴²Nevertheless, even among the rulers many believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved the glory that is from men more than the glory that is from God.

⁴⁴Jesus cried out and said, *He who believes in me, is not believing in me, but [is believing] in the one who sent me.* ⁴⁵And he who looks at me, is looking at the one who sent me. ⁴⁶I have come [to be] a light for the world, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in the darkness. ⁴⁷If any man hears my teaching, but does not obey it, I do not condemn him; for I did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world. ⁴⁸[However,] he who rejects me, and does not receive my teaching, does have one who condemns him; the word that I have spoken, that [word] shall condemn him on the last day. ⁴⁹[This is the case] because I did not speak of my own accord; on the contrary, the Father who sent me, he has commanded me what to say and how to speak. ⁵⁰And I know that his commandment is eternal life. Therefore, what I say is just what the Father has spoken to me. (Jn. 12:35-50)

*See Appendix: Note on the Greek Conjunction $\iota\nu\alpha$

Introduction

There was once a young man—a lawyer by profession—who was converted to Christ. Following his conversion, with his newfound peace with God and joy in the LORD, he witnessed to everyone with whom he came into contact. But in particular, he witnessed to and prayed for one close acquaintance: a man who was a local magistrate and had been elected to the New York state legislature. This man was deeply convicted of sin.

The young Christian was praying for him daily and urging him to give his heart to Christ. The man's conviction became very deep; but still, from day to day, he put off the necessary submission to Christ and did not obtain the hope of salvation.

"My concern for him increased," reported the young Christian.

One afternoon, several of his political acquaintances had a lengthy interview with this man concerning a political deal they desired him to secure for them at the state capitol in Albany. The next morning, when the young Christian encountered this friend for whom he was so greatly concerned, the man declared,

I shall have nothing more to do with the question of submission unto God until I return from the legislature. I stand committed to my political friends to carry out certain measures in the legislature that are incompatible with my first becoming a Christian and I have promised that I will not attend to the subject of becoming a Christian until after I have returned from Albany.

What happened on that previous night, and what happened upon the man's return from Albany, is the rest of the story. But for now, suffice it to say that that man, by refusing to respond to the Word of God, did a very dangerous and deadly thing. He knew that he had to submit to the Word of God; but instead of doing so, he postponed that decision and persisted in his sins—we find a similar situation in John 12:35-50.

We must be aware of the danger in being exposed to the Word of God—especially on a continuous basis—but not responding to that Word with faith and obedience. Because of the danger in hearing God's Word, but not responding to it in a positive way, Jesus urges us to believe without delay.

I. Believe Without Delay, While You Have the Opportunity to Do So

In the passage before us the Lord Jesus urges His hearers to exercise faith in Him—accepting His Word and acting upon it—because their opportunity to do so is rapidly running out. In verse 35 Jesus presents a mini-parable with the object being to impress upon His hearers the need to exercise faith in Him without delay: *“Jesus said to them, ‘The light is with you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before the darkness descends upon you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going.’”* The sun is setting; therefore, do not linger along the roadside. Use the remaining sunlight left in the day to find your way home. Do not allow the darkness to descend upon you while you are still on the road. If you allow that to happen, you will never find your way home and you will be lost forever.

By means of this parable the Lord Jesus is urging men to believe in Him—to accept His Word and act upon it—while they still have the opportunity. Often times we assume that we have allotted to us a life span of 70-80 years; but such is not necessarily the case:

Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.”¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that

appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the LORD's will, we will live and do this or that." (Jas. 4:13-15)

We are tempted to protest: I shall commit my life to Christ at a later date, at present I am a child enjoying my childhood, or a teenager getting my education, or a young man establishing my family and career, or a man in the prime of life, making my fortune, or newly retired, enjoying these leisure years. But we may not have the luxury of having a later date at which time we may respond to Christ. We must be ready should God speak to us the words recorded in Luke 12:20b, *"This very night your life will be demanded from you."*

Often times we assume that the opportunity to respond to Christ and His Word will always be available; but such is not necessarily the case. Note that following what would prove to be Jesus' last public invitation, we read that Jesus *"hid himself from them"* (vs. 36b.) Through the prophet Isaiah, the warning is given:

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. ⁷Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isa. 55:6-7)

It is the LORD who graciously and sovereignly extends the call to believe, and it is the LORD who has the divine prerogative to withdraw that invitation at His own discretion. By way of illustration, an offer made on T.V. or in a magazine is often times accompanied by the urgent appeal: Act now without delay, this offer is subject to withdrawal without further notice. The same may also apply to the divine call to come to Christ and believe in Him.

Furthermore, by means of His comments in verse 36, Jesus indicates that greater spiritual understanding follows faith, it does not precede it: *"While you have the light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of light."* To become a *"son of the light"* means to become a member or partaker of the light, to become a part of the light. Jesus is saying, "You see the light of God in Me, do not wait until you have the fullness of the light before you believe; on the contrary, it is by believing that you will enter into the light and grow in your knowledge of the light of God." As He taught on a previous occasion, *"Jesus therefore said to those Jews who had believed him, 'If you remain in my word you will truly be my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'"* (Jn. 8:31-32.) Again, by way of illustration, we may picture Jesus as standing on one side of a deep precipice and ourselves as standing on the other side; over the precipice He has constructed a bridge, and He now urges us to cross over to Him, but there is the protest: Can the bridge hold my weight? To assure us, the LORD sends a 300-pound angel across the bridge. But we're not satisfied; we want more proof, more assurance. So the LORD now sends a divine "bridge inspector" from heaven that inspects the structure and assures us of its safety. But we demand still further proof, we want to be assured of the inspector's credentials, then we want to know how much

experience he has had in this line of work. We want to be absolutely sure before committing ourselves to Christ. Sometimes this desire for “absolute” assurance arises out of fear, we are afraid to relinquish our life unto Christ; but note Jesus’ instruction to Martha at the tomb of her brother Lazarus, *“Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’”* (Jn. 11:40.) Sometimes this desire for “absolute” assurance is merely a means of concealing a defiant will that has no intention of submitting unto Christ and is looking for an excuse not to do so. As a Christian writer expresses it:

When the imperfect news media warn of some impending danger—a national attack, tornado, fire, loose killer, or bomb scare—people spring into action. But when the Bible comes with news of the greatest impending danger of all, and tells of a Rescuer who came and died and rose again as Lord, they choose not to react or even investigate its claims. All because of “errors” they cannot prove. This double standard needs challenging. Here is a question a person should ask himself: *What really prevents me from accepting Christ as my Savior and Master? Do I really have a reason I can point to, that if answered would open the door to my believing?* (POWER, 8/18/85, p.5)

Jesus replies to our continuing demands for more proof and greater assurance as a condition for us to believe, by declaring, “I have furnished you with adequate proof (note John 20:30-31). You must take the step of faith, and in so doing you will find My “bridge” to be wholly able to support you and bring you to safety.”

May we follow the example of the hymn writer, Charlotte Elliott, in responding to Christ:

Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears,
Within, without,
O Lamb of God,
I come, I come.

Jesus urges us to believe without delay, while we have the opportunity, assuring us that fuller understanding and knowledge follow faith.

II. Believe Without Delay, Because of the Danger in Hearing Without Responding

Whereas John 12:37 informs us that those to whom Jesus spoke **did not** believe, John 12:39 tells us that they **could not** believe. Then a passage from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah (Isa. 6:10) is supplied to explain the reason for this prevention of faith: *“He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart; in order that they should not see with their eyes or perceive with their heart and turn, and I would heal them”* (Jn. 12:40.)

What is presented to us here is the very mysterious and sobering phenomenon we may identify as divine judicial hardening—it is a form of judgment enacted by God against men who hear His Word but who persistently refuse to respond to it. Consider the commission which the LORD gave to Isaiah, and its bearing on our own souls:

He said, "Go and tell this people, 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' ¹⁰Cause the heart of this people to become callous. Cause their ears to become closed, and shut their eyes; so that they may not see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return to me and be healed." (Isa. 6:9-10)

Isaiah is instructed by the LORD, "*Cause the heart of this people to become callous. Cause their ears to become closed, and shut their eyes.*" Isaiah's continual preaching of the Word of God would have the effect of making the people insensitive and unresponsive by virtue of the repetition of the message. By way of illustration: when you first move to the city you are kept awake at night by the sound of sirens, but after repeated exposure to those sirens you block them out and sleep right through the noise—the continuous preaching of the Word of God would have the same effect upon the people spiritually. Isaiah is then told of the purpose and result of his preaching: "*so that they may not see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return to me and be healed.*" Isaiah's ministry was to be a ministry of judgment, a ministry that would produce a judicial hardening of the hearts of these people. Ironically, the very message of salvation would become to them an instrument of judgment: How else could they be saved except by the preaching of the Word of God? Yet the continuous exposure to that Word—without the response of faith and obedience on their part—would cause the people to become callous to that life-giving Word. As a further illustration of this phenomenon, consider the case of a man called to serve as a missionary to Korea after having previously served in Korea in the armed forces: While serving in the army on the peninsula of South Korea, this Christian man was continually exposed to the Korean language, but he made no effort to learn that language, rather, he ignored it. Consequently, he developed a "callousness" to that language that prevented him from effectively learning it when he returned to Korea some years later as a missionary.

The message of Isaiah 6, which had an awful bearing upon the people of Jesus' day, and which we must soberly consider for our own spiritual well-being, is this: When a people have the privilege of hearing the Word of God, but refuse to respond to that Word in faith and obedience, then the continued exposure to that Word eventually has the reverse effect upon them; it causes them to become spiritually numb, insensitive, and unresponsive to it—they become spiritually "callous" to the life-giving Word of God.

Today Jesus urges us to believe—to respond to His Word with faith and obedience—because of the great danger involved in hearing the Word of God

without making a positive response to it. Today Jesus may be saying to you, “Give Me your heart;” or, “Break off an unhealthy relationship—the kind that leads you away from Me and leads you into sin;” or, “Give up an unwholesome ambition—the kind that puts money, or power, or prestige, or supposed security, ahead of your commitment to Me.” As we contemplate our response to His divine call, let us take to heart the counsel of the Book of Hebrews: *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts”* (Heb. 3:15.)

III. Believe Without Delay, Because Jesus Speaks the Very Word of God

Jesus assures us that He does not speak on His own initiative; on the contrary, He speaks the very Word of God. God the Father has told Him what to say, and exactly how to say it: *“I did not speak of my own accord; on the contrary, the Father who sent me, he has commanded me what to say and how to speak”* (Jn. 12:49.)

Jesus, because He is the Son of God, is the Great and Final Prophet from God, as the Book of Hebrews declares, *“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son”* (Heb. 1:1.) While the disciples were with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, *“a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’”* (Matt. 17:5.)

Jesus testifies that He knows that the message He brings from His Father is the message of life. It reveals to us the life of God and invites us to enter into that life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ: *“And I know that his commandment is eternal life. Therefore, what I say is just what the Father has spoken to me”* (Jn. 12:50.) Let us consider well the testimony of the Apostle Peter: *“Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have believed and know that you are the Holy One of God’”* (Jn. 6:68-69.)

Conclusion

What became of that New York legislator who knew that he had to submit to the Word of God, but instead of immediately doing so, he postponed that decision and persisted in his sin? What happened on the night before he left for Albany? What happened when he returned?

Here is the rest of the story:

On the evening of the same day [the day the man informed the young Christian that he would not consider the question of submitting unto Christ until he had returned from Albany] I attempted to carry his case to God, as the urgency in my mind for his conversion had become very great. In my prayer I had drawn very near to God. I do not remember ever having been in more intimate communion

with the Lord Jesus Christ than I was at that time. Indeed, his presence was so real that I was bathed in tears of joy and gratitude and love, and in this state of mind I attempted to pray for this friend.

But the moment I did so, my mouth was shut. I found it impossible to pray a word for him. The LORD seemed to say to me, “No. I will not hear.” As anguish seized upon me, I thought at first it was a temptation. But the door was shut in my face. It seemed as if the LORD said to me, “Speak no more to me of that matter.” It pained me beyond expression. I did not know what to make of it.

From that moment on, I had no spirit of prayer for him at all. As soon as he told me what he had done upon his return from Albany, I understood it. I could see that his convictions were all gone and that the Spirit of God had left him. From that time he grew more careless and hardened than ever.

He remained in his sins, finally fell into decay, and died at last, as I have been told, a dilapidated man. (*The Autobiography of Charles G. Finney*, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis MN, 1977, pp.42-44)

Let us be sure to heed the Scripture that exhorts us, *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts”* (Heb. 3:15.)

Appendix: Note on the Greek Conjunction $\iota\upsilon\alpha$

The Greek text of John 12:37b-38a reads as follows:

... ουκ επιστευον εις αυτον, $\iota\upsilon\alpha$ ο λογος Ησαιου του προφητου
πληρωθη ...

$\iota\upsilon\alpha$ is a conjunction that usually is used to express purpose and, therefore, is usually translated by the English phrase, *“in order that.”* However, as the lexicographers Arndt and Gingrich point out, the use of this conjunction—its range of meaning—*“increased considerably.”* One such expanded usage was *“as a substitute for the infinitive of result.”* In such passages, the conjunction $\iota\upsilon\alpha$ conveys the result of the previously mentioned action and bears the meaning, *“consequently.”*

Arndt and Gingrich go on to say, *“In many cases purpose and result cannot be clearly differentiated, and hence $\iota\upsilon\alpha$ is used for the result that follows according to the purpose of the subject or of God. As in Jewish thought, purpose and result are identical in declarations of the divine will (cp. Lk. 11:50; Jn. 4:36; Rom. 3:19, 5:20, 11:31). The formula $\iota\upsilon\alpha$ πληρωθη is so to be understood, since the fulfillment is according to God’s plan of salvation.”* In other words, in those passages where the conjunction $\iota\upsilon\alpha$ is used with reference to the fulfillment of prophecy, the two

meanings of purpose and result overlap (cp. Mt. 1:22; 2:15; 4:14; 12:17; 21:4; 26:56; Jn. 12:38; 18:12; 19:24,36).

In summary, the conjunction $\iota\nu\alpha$ may either convey purpose (*in order that*) or result (*consequently*). In such a passage as John 12:37b-38a it seems best to understand this Greek conjunction as primarily conveying result: the act of persistent unbelief on the part of the Jews resulted in the fulfillment of the divine prophecy of Isaiah 53:1. Therefore, we may convey the sense of the passage most accurately by rendering it: *“they did not believe in him; consequently, the word of Isaiah the prophet was fulfilled.”*

Source: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; W.F.Arndt and F.W.Gingrich, Editors; The University of Chicago Press; 1957; pp.377-379.