

11/21/2021 - John 12:37-50 - "The God Who Saves"

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[0 : 00] Today's passage presents a complex set of verses of God's power over unbelief and also his involvement within unbelief. Reflecting on this text this week, I began to imagine the introduction of Star Wars. And before you start questioning why, give me a chance to have you understand why this came to mind. If you have watched the Star Wars films, you've probably seen the introduction that is an ongoing, endless narrative of text going across the screen into the horizon. And it's like a never-ending dialogue of text. But the text is important because how it begins is usually a long time ago in a galaxy far away, right? Come on,

Star Wars geeks, make yourself known. Don't be ashamed. I'm one of them. And so why did this come to mind? Well, you might say I'm nuts. That's fine. But it is my inner geek that comes into play often with these types of things. But what is taking place as you're watching that text go off into the horizon of the galaxy is events that have transpired in the past and that are bringing contextual, significant events into the present episode that you're about to watch.

It's catching you up to a long time ago in a galaxy far away. And in the passage today, we are going to see that revealing of similar ongoing events and processes that have taken place along the storyline of unbelief and the rejection of God's Word. And that the promise of God unfolding in the episode today is precisely what God has detailed in past events that would happen that occurred long time ago in a galaxy far away for the sake of the illustration of what God has been doing and what God has said long ago. And so we're concluding the third part of this five-part series in the gospel of John today. This is going to be the end of the third part. And up ahead is the fourth and the fifth part that will be the Lord's Supper. We'll see the farewell discourse in the gospel of John leading to the trial and the passion of Jesus Christ. And we're going to jump back into the series very quickly back in January as we hit January. And so let's pray as we enter into the text in a sermon titled, The God Who Saves. I want to begin because I need the Holy Spirit's help today and you need the Holy Spirit's help today. This is a complex set of verses that stretch into the spans of Old Testament history. And we have a lot to unpack today, but may we be able to simplify by the power of the Holy Spirit the complexity of Scripture in order to equip us as a church to know God and to also know how to live according to God's purposes. We can only do this by the power of the Holy Spirit. So let's pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help us. Please join me in prayer.

Father, at this time as we enter into a time of looking upon what you have been doing since a long time ago, we pray, God, that you make your word come to life today.

That we are entering into not just an ordinary storyline. This is a storyline concerning redemption that you have planned out, that you have laid out since the foundations of the world.

[5 : 10] This is not a time to nod off, to scroll through Instagram or Facebook or Twitter. Father, this is a time that we need your help to focus in on the things that matter, the things that are laying, lay waiting ahead.

So Father, by the power of your Holy Spirit, captivate our minds right now in this church body as we enter into your authoritative inspired word. We praise in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is going to be broken up into two sections. John breaks it up into two clear sections, so we will do the same. And so the first section we're going to see is the problem and promise of unbelief. The problem and promise of unbelief. And we're going to look at this through verses 37 and 43. And John makes it clear that there is a historic problem of unbelief. There's a historic problem of unbelief, but also a promise of unbelief.

[6 : 35] Let's look at the problem. Because this section of passage gives John a chance to provide a commentary. We live in a world filled with commentaries.

They have Bibles that have commentaries on the bottom of passages. Well, John provides a commentary of what is going on here. As we're saying, how could people reject something so clear that a man who has been dead in a tomb for four days comes to life?

How do you not believe in that, right? We scratch our heads at that. John provides a commentary of what in the world is going on. Verse 37 serves as a statement of indictment that reveals the historic problem of man's unbelief.

Verse 37 says, Though he had done many signs before them, they still did not believe in him. This takes us back to the sinfulness of man. That it is within our imputed, our gifted, sinful nature not to believe.

[7 : 58] That our natural instinct in life is to rebel against a holy God. Our natural instinct is to not believe.

Our hearts are simply hardened from a component of imputed sin. And we see that this also comes into play within the biblical context of the Gospel of John.

This stretches back to after Jesus heals the blind man who has been born blind. The religious authorities ask Jesus, Are we blind?

After he says a discourse of, You know, only those who have eyes to see will see. And the Pharisees ask him, Are we blind? And this stretches back to the pool of where the invalid of over 30 years was healed, which led to persecution.

These things you would imagine would bring the faith of people. That something so clear occurred that they would see what God is doing.

[9 : 13] Well, this problem doesn't just remain in the Gospel of John. This stretches back to Deuteronomy, even the days of Moses. Deuteronomy 29, 2.

I'm just going to read it to you. And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land.

The great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. In verse 4, But to this day, the Lord has not given you a heart to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear.

We see that there is a condition that we have to face. Being upon this earth, being created and imputed with the sinfulness and the sinful nature of Adam, that we have to be reckoned with the fact that we are fallen, we are depraved.

We need God to intervene. That's the problem of unbelief. But there is also a historic promise of unbelief. And we're going to see that also as John continues.

[10 : 35] John informs us that not only did they reject the signs, because they are born sinful, they have sinful hearts, but he says, look with me, they could not believe.

They could not believe. Also known as they were powerless to believe. And John dives into the narrative of the prophet Isaiah to explain what was occurring here, was simply not a turn and burn. This wasn't a Billy Graham crusade of, come to faith in Jesus Christ. It's a little bit more complex than just turning. This, what was happening, that's unraveling before the eyes of men, was specific prophecy being fulfilled regarding the hardness of the hearts of men.

And there are several passages in Scripture that raise a lot of good questions from our perspectives. Right?

They draw upon the curiosity of God's goodness and faithfulness. And oftentimes we can miss the forest for a tree and kind of sentimentalize God's providence in life according to our finite comprehension.

[12 : 08] Asking questions about theodicy, like the problem of evil. If God was so good, then why doesn't he soften their heart? Or why doesn't he do this? And we can ask those questions, and they're very good questions.

And this is one of those passages that make us ask these questions. And so what John provides for us is what's going on within the stretch of redemptive history.

He brings in two references from Isaiah. One reference in Isaiah 53, being word for word from the prophet Isaiah. And then also Isaiah 6.10, which is more of a paraphrase of what the prophet Isaiah said.

In order to uncover what John is communicating within these references to Isaiah, we have to first understand their context and usage by the prophet.

We have to understand what was going on then in order to understand why John is offering this into his commentary. Within these two contexts of passage, there are two references that actually share a lot in common.

[13:24] And they are both pronounced judgments upon unbelieving Israel. The first reference in Isaiah 53 is the graphic and horrific rejection of God's servants.

The second reference is connected to that rejection, which God has promised long ago that deals with dull hearts, heavy ears, and blind eyes.

And actually, Isaiah 6.10, if you go back into the book of Isaiah, chapter 6, verse 10, is actually a chiasm that the emphasis is all upon the blind eyes.

And here, John uses that as a paraphrase for significance. We ask, why is John saying this here? What's the purpose?

It's not just to tick Arminians off about God's involvement in salvation, but John is providing insight into redemptive trajectory that spans a long series of events from a long time ago that stems from the Israel's beginnings through the nation being led under Moses and Deuteronomy, that stretches all throughout the prophetic books in the prophet Isaiah, what he wrote, and is bringing into fulfillment here and now what is happening in Jesus' ministry at this point in time.

[15:01] And in the complexity, the intricate providence of God, the unbelief of these Jewish peoples was due to the hardening of God that he did upon man's heart in order that what was prophesied long ago would be brought into fulfillment according to God's plan.

And the narrative of the Old Testament makes it clear that the reason they couldn't believe is because God blinded their eyes, that God hardened their hearts, so they couldn't understand, they couldn't be healed.

Now, no matter your theological disposition, under the authority of God's word and directive of scripture, we as students of his word have to reckon with the truth found within his word that makes it clear God alone has the power to save.

One thing we can't miss in this reference to Isaiah is that they also share the common theme of rejection of God's servants and that God has hardened their hearts, but it's also the very means of God's exaltation, of God's glory.

And the truth is, salvation is to exalt God and bring him glory alone. How else will he be brought to glory unless he initiates that very miracle that occurs within all of our hearts?

[17:02] To God alone be the glory. God saves. If you look at Isaiah within context, Isaiah 49 through 51 gives a promise.

It gives a promise of God to deliver his people who were estranged from him so that they can fulfill their mission in and to the world. And then it gets into, after chapter 51, it gets into Isaiah 52, which gives this graphic depiction of God's servants who would suffer and be marred beyond recognition who will die.

And the fruit of unbelief will be put upon his body. It will be the bloodstains upon the cross. And Isaiah 53 is the mission of substitution that this suffering servant was wounded for our transgression, that he was crushed for our iniquity to bring us peace.

And this is what John is saying that has occurred long ago. And so the will of this text through the commentary of John's narration to understand that the unbelief of the Jews is not a problem in the slightest, that this is actually a precise promise of fulfilled Old Testament scripture and prophecy. And John also rightly brings an illustration of that saving faith is what we'll call it, that gift of saving faith. John brings an illustration in verse 42 that makes it clear that you cannot manufacture saving faith.

[18:58] And it is truly a gift from God. Look at verse 42. It says, Nevertheless, many, many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But for fear of the Pharisees, they did not confess it so that they wouldn't be put out of the synagogue.

For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

Some people believed in Jesus, but they did not follow Jesus.

They knew the truth, but they did not confess it and hid because they loved the glory of man rather than the glory of God.

John is saying that you cannot even manufacture belief. you can fake it throughout this life, but you're not going to make it essentially.

You cannot manufacture it. Only the faith that God initiates within our hearts is faith that is able to stand the test of time and the trials that life brings.

[20 : 32] I got to ask you today, for those of us who are believers, how is the love of God evidenced in our lives?

How does that testify to our faith in Him? Because we can have, we can pay lip service to believing in Jesus Christ, but if our lives are disconnected from a lifestyle worthy of imitation, worthy of, that was modeled by Jesus Christ, we are proving that our faith in Jesus Christ is truly just lip service. It's manufactured. And we ought to be fervent in prayer, asking God to help us. Maybe for some of us, our love for the world actually contradicts our faith that we claim we have in Him.

And if this might be you today, according to Scripture, it calls you to repent.

It calls you to reevaluate your first love that you believe you have. God is to God to you to you to you to you today of turning from this phony faith and asking God to soften your hardened heart.

[22 : 12] We also see a second section in this passage that I've titled The Hope We Have in Jesus Christ.

And within 44 and 50, verse 44 and 50, John ends this segment of Jesus' earthly ministry before he shifts gears into the passion narrative with great hope that we have that we should be giving great attention today.

as his church. I can't talk about the content of God initiating and doctrines of grace without quoting John Calvin, right?

I mean, John Calvin says, faith is not born in the ordinary human faculties, but is a unique and rare gift of God. And so, if what the Bible says is true, if what John Calvin says is true, we must understand that while it's our prevalent disposition to ruminate upon why God would ever harden anyone's heart, we can ruminate upon that question, we could die with that question, but in so doing, we are going to die in our sin.

Scripture tells us that we could ruminate on that, but it's better, and we better rather ruminate upon what makes us worthy of being softened, that we are better to give attention to something else.

[24 : 08] We can ruminate upon God hardening and things like that, but there's something worthy of our attention, and it is that the same God who is responsible for the hardening of man's heart is the same God who is responsible for the softening of hardened hearts.

Isn't that much more worthy of our attention, church? for this reason, John interrupts his commentary. He makes a great commentary known of what God has been doing, but it's almost like the salesman on the infomercials at the end at 12 o'clock midnight, but wait, there's more.

He interrupts this fact, and he goes to Jesus' words, and John notes that Jesus cries out. Whoever believes, whoever sees, anyone who hears is promised to be united to God the Father through God the Son.

Jesus Christ is the glory of God that the prophet Isaiah referenced to back in verse 41. Jesus Christ is the arm of the Lord that has been revealed in verse 38.

And the good news of the gospel that the church of all ages is commissioned to is to reveal the God who is responsible of initiating our salvation, the God who calls men and women, no matter your ethnicity, no matter where you're from, no matter your sinful records of the past, he calls you to Jesus.

[26 : 14] It is God who saves them. Roman Catholic indulgences have no power to save. Pentecostal gifts of tongues has no power to save.

Jesus Christ has the power to save. Only through Jesus Christ. But what we have to understand, too, is that where truth exists, indictment also exists.

When you know that the speed limit clearly said 25, and you're flying through there, you clearly know that where truth is apparent, you got the sign, and you're ignoring the sign, what's that going to equal?

It's going to equal a ticket, especially if you're in Canfield or Poland. Lord have mercy. Right? And so you have the sign clearly displaying, Jesus is the way to salvation, and it is God who saves. Ignore that sign, guess what lays waiting ahead? Judgment. John makes that clear through marking Jesus' words, that judgment works in tandem with the truth revealed, that to reject the message of Jesus Christ is to be rejected by God.

[27 : 48] Behold, I never knew you, he will say. Elsewhere in Scripture, Paul cites this divine phenomenon of God's saving at the end of the book of Acts.

And this is where Paul preached a sermon from sunup to sundown. Wouldn't that be fun? Sunup to sundown.

And he notes in the end of the book of Acts that there was a mixed response of pleading with these people to follow Jesus, to know the truth of the gospel.

Some believed, some were on the fence teetering, and some just completely flat out rejected. Truly we should know that God alone is in control and his ways are wise and just regarding our salvation and the salvation of others.

The fact that God alone is responsible to soften a heart, the fact that God alone is responsible to relieve a heavy ear, the fact that God alone is responsible to give sight to the blind, to bring understanding to the mind, what else has the power, church, to bring us such great blessed assurance, in our salvation?

[29 : 21] What else has the power to propel us as his church to great vibrant activity of evangelism in our areas of influence?

What else has the power to make us dead to the things of this world and alive to the things that are in Christ?

Church, if you are a Christian, you are alive in Christ. You are united to Jesus Christ and equally united in the Father, just as Jesus' words in this passage.

There is nothing that can tear you from his grasp, and he is the one who will keep you secure forever until the end of time, because it's him who saves, it's him who keeps.

Church, and also we have to understand that the sovereignty of God, I see this a lot when we talk about what we speak about today, is that it brings about this sense of fatalism, that if God is sovereign, it kind of negates any human responsibility that he's gonna do what he's gonna do, he doesn't need you, and it kind of minimizes some people's sort of urgency to evangelize the world.

[30 : 52] It makes you kind of comfortable, it gives you an excuse to just let people figure out their own salvation. But this should not excuse, the sovereignty of God should not excuse us from the call, the urging call of evangelizing this world for Jesus Christ.

It should encourage it. This is important because often when we evangelize the world, I could guarantee you, if we went down to YSU and we talked to a hundred students about Jesus Christ, I guarantee a majority of them would probably say, yeah, I don't do religion, or yeah, I'm Catholic, or I'm fine, you know, whatever, you do you, I'll do me, you know, good vibes, whatever the slogan is, and you're good, I'm good.

This can bring about great discouragement that actually kind of takes us out of the evangelistic call altogether. But when people reject the gospel, we have to understand that it is God's prerogative to save.

That it's not our will, it's His will, and it's up to Him to determine who will respond to the gospel, when they'll respond to the gospel, and the church is glorified seed spreaders.

That we are called to that very task. Consider the very fact that Peter preached early in the book of Acts, and 3,000 were saved.

[32 : 32] Very good sermon, mind you. And then just a little bit later, a couple chapters later, Stephen preached a fantastic sermon.

I would have gotten asked to get baptized again after hearing Stephen preach. And what happened? He was stoned to death. Can we continually, church, to faithfully evangelize, even if it appears that everything that we're doing is failing?

Will we be devoted to the mission field, even if it takes years and years and years to see its fruit? I like to look at evangelism how I look at discipleship.

That our discipleship, our sanctification, our growing and maturing in our faith is not sticking ourselves like chicken nuggets in a McDonald's deep fryer and, you know, pop out chicken nuggets in, you know, about a minute.

What discipleship is is to be looked at as like a slow cooker. That this is a process that takes time. And evangelism is similar to that because it is God's will that saves.

[33 : 45] It's God's plan and according to his plan that he calls sinners to life. And so, as John ends this section of the gospel with a conclusion, he summarizes the mission of Jesus, the hope of Jesus, and the authority of Jesus.

Just as it was read today, friends, everyone in here is not going to be able to escape the judgment that awaits.

We are all going to face judgment. However, for those who have faith in Jesus Christ, have an advocate, one who stepped in and bore the penalty for our sin on our behalf.

But for those who reject the message of Jesus Christ, are promised in pending doom, there is no hope. that just as verse 50 says, Jesus remarks, and I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me. Some of us may be hung up on the truth of God's sovereignty and salvation and are concerned about all the others in the world.

[35 : 18] what about the little tribe in Africa that are secluded from society, but what about them? What about them? God knows them.

But when you are asking what about them, God is going to stand before you in a time of judgment and say, no, it's not about them. What about you?

everything that clouds your judgment at this time of determining if you are going to follow and hear and respond to the gospel today.

Let God sort out the unknowns around us and the problem of evil and why this happens and why that happens. Can we understand that our comprehension in this life is simply limited?

We're not going to know a complex God. There are so many complexities, so many intricacies within the nature of God. And God is concerned about you and that time of judgment.

[36 : 24] And he has given you an advocate. If you are not a Christian today, receive that advocate today.

allow God, pray for God to soften your hardened heart. Honestly, at times it can be discouraging when I know folks who have heard the truth, who I've even spoke to, I've articulated the gospel, I think probably I probably could have written a book, how well it was articulated.

But they still remain in unbelief. It's sometimes discouraging. And this is discouraging. discouraging. But the truth of God's word remains, regardless of how we feel.

That God always works through his word. That all the way back to Genesis 1, God brought forth life through his word. Through the Old Testament, God has, God's word has provided a pathway of life and blessing.

into the Old Testament, faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of Jesus. God always works through his word.

[37 : 43] And his word has been used to call men and women to life and salvation throughout all the ages. And his word never changes, regardless of how you feel.

You cannot have Jesus without embracing his teaching. Just as you cannot have a relationship with God apart from Jesus Christ. The God who has the power to save is calling unbelief today to bow down to him in ultimate surrender.

Our only concern should not be God's hardening, but it should be our hearing, our believing, our seeing, and God's softening.

God alone has the power to save, and may we be a church that reflects and is empowered by God's saving work in our day today.

Let's pray. God alone is calling it all for forgiveness, and may we thank us for our nation and God at life. Amen. God alone has the foundation for real life right here.

[39 : 01] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.