

John 12:37–50: Why Settle for Hell When You Can Believe in Jesus?

Rev. Jason Forbes. 20th March, 2022

I always find it astounding when people choose one thing over something better. For example:

- Why would you choose to eat a burnt sausage over a tender steak?
- Why would you drink water when you could have wine?
- Why would you walk when you can catch a bus?
- Why would you catch a bus when you can drive?
- Why would you rent when you can buy a house?
- Why buy Windows PC when you can buy a Mac? (Sorry, that's just me!)

These a “no-brainer” questions. Of course there are exceptions.

But we would expect most people to eat the steak, drink the wine, catch the bus, drive the car, and buy the house. These are obviously better choices.

So, why would anyone settle for hell when they can believe in Jesus? Why would anyone settle for hell and being separated from God for eternity when they can believe in Jesus and have eternal life and the blessings that come from that now? It should be a “no-brainer”, right?? Of course we would expect people to believe in Jesus! But many don't.

It was the same in Jesus day. There were those who refused to believe in Jesus. So, John hits the pause button in his gospel to look at why people are settling for hell and judgement over belief in Jesus.

In verses 37–43, John provides an editorial comment to explain why this is the case. John tells us that Jesus had done many signs in front of the Jewish leader, and yet they refused to believe (v. 37). Throughout his gospel, John has been mounting evidence for people to believe in Jesus. For example:

- Jesus is the water of life through whom people receive salvation and worship God (4:21–16).
- Jesus comes with the authority of God because he is God in the flesh (5:18–29).
- Jesus is the bread of life who sustains people for eternity (6:22–65).
- Jesus is the light of the world revealing who God really is (8:12–29).
- Jesus is from all eternity (8:48–59).
- Jesus is the good shepherd who cares and provides for God's people, and sacrifices himself for them (10:7–12).
- Jesus is the resurrection and the life - the one who is going to bring about God's final purposes (11:25–26).

John recorded all this so that we would believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that by believing we would have life in his name (20:31). With such mounting evidence, what possible reason could people have to settle for hell and judgement over believing in Jesus?

John gets his answer from Isaiah 53, some 700-odd years before. Back in Isaiah, people were not getting the message either (v. 38). The context of Isaiah's day was God's people were being threatened by the other nations around them. The message they heard was quite simple: stay faithful to God, and you'll be safe. There's nothing complicated about that message. What made the message complicated was when they bring their own terms and conditions to the message.

They wanted to keep trusting in other gods, and keep their political alliances to keep the threat at bay. Staying faithful to God would've meant getting rid of all that. Something they weren't prepared to do.

So, God tells Isaiah that 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” (v. 39). Now, that doesn't sound like a very good evangelism technique, does it? But I've heard it said, every time someone hears the gospel, it either softens their hearts or makes it harder. In Isaiah's day, they were hanging on to their gods and political alliances so tightly, every time they heard the message, they held on to them even tighter, and shut their eyes and ears to the message. They were hanging on to what they wanted so tightly they couldn't see the great salvation that God had for them, or even hear about it. Neither could they hear about God's great plan to restore them through the person of Jesus.

It was a similar situation in Jesus day (vv. 41–43). People did not want to hear the message that Jesus is the one sent by God. The reason being, they wanted to be the centre of attention. They wanted to be glorified. They wanted to be accepted by their community. They wanted their own way.

The NIV translates verse 43 as, “for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.” But I think the ESV is more accurate, “for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” Now we can get the idea that they didn't want to see Jesus taking their spotlight. They were hanging on to man's glory so tightly they shut their eyes and ears to the glory of God standing right in front of them in the person of Jesus. And so, they could not believe. Even those who did believe couldn't delight in God's glory as much as they should have for the same reasons.

It's the same today. The message of the gospel is so simple. Yet we miss it because we're hanging on to other things. Occasionally, I hear the question “can a person with an intellectual disability understand the gospel?” And every time I think, “Well, what's the gospel?”

Let me give you the gospel in its simplest form: God loves you, and you need to love him back.

Now, we can unpack all kinds of stuff from that. God sent Jesus because God loved the world (3:16), and we love God back by believing in Jesus, and we can keep going. But when you boil it right down the message is God loves you, and you need to love him back. It really doesn't get any more complicated than that.

What makes that message complicated is when we add our own terms and condition to that message:

- What about my career?
- What about my family and friends if I start believing in Jesus? What will they think?
- What about my hobbies and interests?
- What about my hurt?
- What about my personal identity?
- What about my relationship?
- What about sex?

When our terms and conditions, and what we want, becomes more important than the message itself, we will end up settling for hell and judgement rather than believing in Jesus.

Again, the message is very simple: God loves you, and you need to love him back.

So, let's flip our question around and ask, why would you choose believing in Jesus over settling for hell? John answers this question by quoting Jesus. He tells us Jesus didn't merely speak in verses 44–50, but he cried out. Jesus really wanted people to take note of what he says here. This is his last plea to the people before he goes to the cross. It was at the cross where he was going to die for people's sin then rise to life in order to restore people in a right relationship with God for eternity. So, what are some reasons for choosing Jesus over hell?

1. We should believe in Jesus because to believe in Jesus is to believe in God. To see Jesus is to see God (12:44–45). Jesus isn't just a prophet or teacher or some goof-ball healer. Jesus is the fullest representation of God. As the Bible says, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Col 1:19). Not just because he represents God, but because he is God. God in the flesh experiencing the same hurt and pain and frustration as the rest of us. As the Bible says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb 4:12). To reject Jesus is to reject God. As such,
2. We should believe in Jesus because Jesus has come into the world to reveal God (v. 46). Sometimes the proverbial elephant is referred to where some blind people are describing the elephant by what they can feel, never realising that they're all describing the same elephant. That's how all the different world religions are often imagined - all describing the same God in different ways. But, we know as Christians this simply isn't true because Jesus reveals God. He takes all the guess work out of knowing God and what he is like. Jesus takes people out of spiritual darkness and puts them in the light where they can know God personally. For this reason,
3. We should believe in Jesus because Jesus' words become the standard as to whether one spends eternity with God, or goes to hell (vv. 47–48). If you hear Jesus words, and choose not to obey them, you are in fact choosing hell over Jesus. Not my words. I wish I could tell you something different, but I can't. Hear the words of Jesus for yourself: "The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day." Rejecting Jesus and his word is very, very serious. Because,
4. The authority with which Jesus speaks doesn't stop with him. It goes all the way to God (vv. 49–50). Jesus doesn't just speak on his own, but he speaks what God the Father tells him. You can't get any higher authority than that. It's an authority that we can't influence or bargain with. We simply cannot add our terms and conditions to this authority. Jesus has the final say because he speaks the very words of God!

So what does this mean for us today?

Three things:

Firstly, if you're here this morning and don't believe in Jesus, why not? What terms and conditions are you adding to that simple message, "God loves you, and you need to love him back." The tighter you hold on to your terms and conditions, the harder it's going to be to see the salvation in Jesus that God has made available to you, and the great love he has for you. What has become more important to you than God's love... expressed in the death and resurrected of Jesus for your the forgiveness of your sins... for ignoring his love and mercy that he lavishes upon you every single day? I implore you, reconsider the importance of your terms and conditions and accept the great love God has for you, and start loving him back in the way you live.

Secondly, maybe you've been coming to church 20, 30, 40 years or more. But you're just here to tick some boxes and have an each way bet so that maybe God will be good to you. In reality, you're still hanging on to your terms and conditions oh so tightly. Please let go of them. Let go of them so that you may enjoy the glory of Jesus and his love and mercy all the more.

Thirdly, maybe you've been walking with Jesus closely for a long time. You have accepted Jesus, and have listened to his word. But now you're a little restless in your faith, and you're looking over the fence at the world thinking, "Yeah, I wouldn't mind a bit of that." I get it. I know the temptation. But, please don't go there. It's not good. It's never good. I have seen Christians forsake their faith thinking that they will get more. In reality, they end up with far less. Instead, love the glory that comes from God, and can only be found in Jesus. Then learn to delight in him. Maybe you have gone there, and you know exactly what I'm talking about. Perhaps it's time for you to return to Jesus, and behold his glory once more.

Because, why settle for hell, when you can believe in Jesus?

Lets Pray.