

## The Root Cause of Unbelief

John 12:32–43

This message is part of a series based on texts which contain the phrase “that it might be fulfilled.” Today, we take a text from the gospel of John, which uses a variation of that expression. As we heard in our Scripture reading a moment ago, John testifies of Christ that “although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, *that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled*, which he spoke: ‘Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’” (John 12:37–38). Notice that John says: “that the word of Isaiah the prophet *might be fulfilled*.” John is pointing out that Jesus’ life and ministry—including the tragic fact that many of the Jews to whom he came refused to believe in him—was the fulfillment of prophecies written by the inspiration of God some 700 years before.

John states his purpose for writing his gospel at the end of chapter 20, where he says, “Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, *that ye might believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” His purpose in writing was that his readers “might *believe*.” He wants them to believe in Jesus the Messiah so that they can be saved and go to heaven. Yet here in chapter 12 were observant Jews who were expecting the Messiah, who knew that when Messiah came, he was going to perform miracles to prove that he was indeed the true Messiah sent by God, yet, when he came, they “did *not* believe in him.” Isaiah had prophesied that when God would come to save his people, one of the signs that he would perform would be: “then the eyes of the blind shall be opened.” Just three chapters previous in John’s gospel Jesus healed a man *born* blind—an astounding miracle. Jesus didn’t simply sharpen the visual acuity of someone who wasn’t seeing well; rather, he enabled a man who had been “blind from birth”—who had never seen light, his entire life—to receive the gift of sight. Here is a picture of the miracle of regeneration—the act of God, by his Spirit, whereby he grants spiritual life to a sinner who is spiritually dead, who doesn’t realize that he is “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and *blind*, and naked”<sup>1</sup> and on his way to hell until he has been born again—supernaturally born from above. If you have never come in faith to Jesus the Savior, then you do not realize your danger, you do not realize that, should you die without Christ, you are lost and bound for eternity in the lake of fire, the place of everlasting torment. Only if God opens your spiritually blind eyes and gives you the gift of faith, is there hope for you. Attend to the message of the gospel and come to Christ by faith today. If you call upon him, he will save you.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. 3:17

Look closely at John 12:32. Jesus says, “And I, if I am *lifted up* from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” What does Jesus mean by his expression “*lifted up* from the earth”?

Earlier he has already said: “And as Moses *lifted up* the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be *lifted up*: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14–15). There, the reference is to Numbers 21, where the children of Israel, wandering through the vast Sinai desert and becoming discouraged because of the difficulty of the journey, began to speak against Moses and against God. This is what the Bible calls “evil speaking,”<sup>2</sup> where people murmur and complain and publicly air their grievances against God and his providence, unjustly accusing God of evil or mismanagement or of laying upon us burdens we humans should not have to bear. To do such is to put *ourselves*—*our* comfort, *our* happiness—over the glory of God. It is to hold God to a higher standard than *himself*—a thing impossible, because God is sovereign and beholden to no man. It is to fail to love God with all our heart. It is to put *our* agenda above the Lord’s. The Christian’s duty is to pray, “*thy* kingdom come, *thy* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The believing heart prays, “Lord, I am a vessel in your hands; be glorified in me—use me however you see fit.”

In the Numbers account, when the people complained and murmured, “the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.” This shows us what God thinks of murmuring and complaining. The fiery serpents were God’s judgment on a rebellious people, and it served his purpose. They came to Moses and confessed, “We have sinned in speaking against the LORD. Pray to the LORD that he take away the serpents from us.” Moses prayed for the people, and the LORD instructed him to “make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” Moses did so. Clearly, the comparison in John 3 is between Moses’ *lifting up* the bronze serpent upon a pole, and the Son of man being *lifted up* upon a cross. The cross of Christ is the most important event in human history. It is the defining event of the gospel. If Jesus had never been crucified on a cruel Roman cross—lifted up to be ridiculed and mocked and spit upon by evil men—there would be no gospel; for at the cross the sinless One was *lifted up* to die on behalf of sinners, and it is through Christ’s death on the cross that helpless, unworthy sinners are saved.

Do you know that you are a sinner? Do you know that you have no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? Then your duty is to confess him before men and make him your Lord forever. If you confess him before men, the risen and exalted

---

<sup>2</sup> Eph. 4:31, 1 Pet. 2:21

Lord promises to confess you at the final day before our Father who is in heaven: “This one is mine; I died for him; I gave him my perfect righteousness.”

We see the phrase again in John 8. When Jesus teaches in the temple treasury, he says to the Jews, “When you *lift up* the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things” (John 8:28). Here, Christ explicitly says that it is *man*—not the Lord—who will lift him up to die. So now we are beginning to grasp the meaning of his promise, “And I, *if I am lifted up* from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” He is speaking about his being lifted up on a cross at the hands of wicked men who hate him and want to destroy him: “When *you* lift up the Son of man.” But in the incomparable wisdom of God, who works out all things in history for his glory and our good, the language fits the resurrection and the ascension as well. Christ is *lifted up* to die by wicked men, but that will be followed by his being *lifted up* out of the grave by the Holy Spirit of God at his resurrection, and by his being *lifted up* from earth to heaven, where he is seated even at this very moment at the Father’s right hand, ruling and directing all things in heaven and on earth for his own glory and for the good of us, his people. Christian, you can be perfectly assured that *whatever* happens in your life is for a purpose, that God might be glorified in you and mature you and perfect you and fit you for heaven. You might not be able to understand it all right now, but you will, by and by. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Have you experienced a reversal, a disappointment, an accident, ill health—something you cannot understand? Maybe things seem unbearable at present, but God is in control. In Christ we will be more than conquerors through him who loves us. We need not fear. The divine Son is our Protector, and he will save us. Amen!

So Jesus says, “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” The word translated “draw” is a powerful word. It’s basic meaning is *drag*. It is used in Acts 21, where we read that “all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and *dragged* him out of the temple.”<sup>3</sup> Imagine being dragged against your will. So as it is used in our present text it highlights our Lord’s sovereignty in sending his Spirit to sovereignly draw God’s elect to himself. There can be no doubt that *all* the elect, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, will be saved at the final day. Of all that the Father has given Christ he will lose nothing but raise it up at the last day. If you belong to Christ, he will surely save you. *Nothing* can separate you from the love of Christ. You are secure in him. Amen!

---

<sup>3</sup> Acts 21:30

So the meaning of our text is that when Christ is lifted up from the earth to die, he will sovereignly draw *all* peoples—men, women and children from every nation and people group—to himself. He will infallibly save those he came to save. John continues: “This He said, signifying by what death He would die.” Jesus would die by crucifixion. If he had died any other way, he would not have fulfilled biblical prophecy.

This past week a cousin of mine in another state sent me a photo of her mother-in-law, smiling and beaming on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday exactly one month ago today, on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026. She was surrounded by family, helping her celebrate the happy occasion. Thirteen days later she fell and broke her hip. She died last Tuesday, and her funeral is tomorrow. “Man knoweth not his time”<sup>4</sup>—but God knows! Jesus could confidently say: “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself,” knowing that there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can prevent what God has sovereignly ordained to happen. “The Son of Man *must* be lifted up.” He died by crucifixion, he was raised by the power of the Spirit, and he ascended to heaven, exactly as foretold by Scripture. He could confidently predict the manner of his death, knowing that it would take place exactly as he foretold it. No mere man could possibly foresee this, but Christ is *more* than a man—he is the God-man, truly God and truly man. As God, he could bear the sins of all his people and endure the full measure of God’s wrath against sin; yet he is man, able to die in the place of sinful man. Only in Christ, the God-man, could our salvation be accomplished. Amen!

Skipping to verse 37, we read: “But although He had done so many *signs* before them, they did not believe in Him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: ‘Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’” The word “signs” is John’s preferred term for a miracle. Jesus’ miracles were not random, lacking a definite plan or purpose; they were signs, pointing to something, and what they pointed to was Jesus’ deity. Isaiah prophesied: “Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing” (Isa. 35:4–6). Here is a prophecy of God coming to save his people. It was spoken by the prophet Isaiah under inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. God would come with vengeance against his enemies, the Jews who rejected him, but he would come to save his people. And when he came, he would perform miracles. The eyes of the blind would be opened, the ears of the deaf would be unstopped, the lame would leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb would speak. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary advises that the word *dumb*, meaning

---

<sup>4</sup> Eccl. 9:12

*lacking the ability to speak*, is dated and offensive, but I use the term because the Bible uses it. The Bible is not ridiculing a human being, made in the image of God, because of a handicap. Way back in Exodus 4 God says, “Who hath made man’s mouth? or who maketh the *dumb*, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD?” It is important to remember that when God finished the creation on the sixth day, he deemed it “very good.” Man, alone among the creatures, is made in God’s image and likeness. When God looks at man, he sees his own image, and he is satisfied. Nevertheless, the creation bears the curse, because of sin. As Christians, we look forward to the day when the curse will be lifted, and we who put our hope and trust in Christ will sing, with renewed hearts and bodies, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!” By the power of the Holy Spirit we will achieve the purpose for which we were created, and it will be glorious! In the meantime, we should never ridicule another human being on account of a handicap. To do so is to ridicule the God who created us. Not one of us is perfect yet, but we serve a perfect Savior who is in the world today, working all things according to the counsel of his own will, a Savior who is going to perfectly fulfill every detail of the Father’s will.

So the Savior came and performed all the sign-miracles that the Father prepared for him to do. And the Jews of Jesus’ day saw those signs. Here were people who knew the Scriptures and should have recognized God’s Messiah as he walked among them. But their hearts were hardened. They didn’t like the Messiah that God had sent. They wanted a Messiah who would deliver them from the domination of Rome. They resented a Messiah whose perfections highlighted their own sinful imperfections. They did not want a Messiah who would go to the cross. They surely did not want a Messiah whose purpose was to call the Gentiles. They were very stuck on the notion that they were the favored race. They did not want to be around men and women whom they considered to be subhuman, Gentile “dogs.” They mistakenly thought that salvation was a matter of *race*, not *grace*. Through the evil influence of dispensationalism a lot of these ideas have made their way into the church. Though the Bible clearly says, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal. 3:28), millions of American Christians think that the Jewish-Gentile distinction still matters, and that what really matters is being on the side of the Jews. But what really matters is being on the right side of Christ! The Bible teaches that in *Christ*, all the nations—people-groups—of the world will be blessed. There will be no Jew-Gentile distinction in heaven. Rather, the focus will be on Christ. *He* will reign forever and ever. Of his kingdom there shall be no end. The saints’ song will be: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and

riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.”<sup>5</sup> The focus will be not on ourselves, but on him.

But in our John text, here are Jews who had the singular privilege of seeing the long-awaited Messiah with their own eyes when he came. Jesus walked and talked among them. They heard his teaching and observed his miracles. John would later describe the great privilege that was theirs when he would write in his first epistle, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, *which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled*, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and *we have seen*, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that *which we have seen and heard we declare to you*, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.”<sup>6</sup>

But the Jews in our John 12 text did *not* believe. Christ was an offense and a stumbling block to them. They knew the biblical prophecies. They heard Jesus’ teaching. They saw his miracles—miracles that were to attest the promised Messiah when he came. But their hearts were blinded. They preferred the darkness of sin to the light of the Gospel. They saw the Light of the world with their physical eyes, but they preferred the darkness of sin. Our Lord’s words were fulfilled when he said, “For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov’d” (John 3:20). They refused to come to Christ, that they might be saved, so they died without Christ, to face the unmitigated wrath of God without a mediator—a positively terrifying thought.

And so in the unbelief of the first-century Jews the prophecy of Isaiah 53 was fulfilled, when he said, “Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” Here was the long-promised Messiah standing before them in human flesh, doing miracles that validated his Messiahship. Furthermore, the Jews’ unbelief was a fulfillment of Isaiah 6:9–10: “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.” Here were men and women who were privileged, with access to the Old Testament Scriptures. Moreover, they personally witnessed the Messiah of Israel with their own eyes—but they refused to believe. Their hearts remained darkened. They refused to turn—turn away from their sins, and turn to Christ—that they might be saved.

Here, then, is the root cause of unbelief. It is the effect of Adam’s first sin, when he disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, contrary to God’s command, and

---

<sup>5</sup> Rev. 5:12

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 1:1–4

God cursed him and his posterity for it. As our Shorter Catechism puts it, “The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell consists in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin . . .”<sup>7</sup> Apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, man’s nature is corrupt. He is spiritually blind. He loves darkness, rather than light. He will not come to the Light, because he doesn’t want his sin exposed. He is a corrupt tree, and will only continue to bear corrupt fruit. His only hope is the regenerating work of God’s Spirit.

As a minister of the Gospel I warn you to flee to Jesus Christ, the only Savior, the only way of salvation. Believe in him. Become his follower. Commit your life to him. Take his yoke upon you and learn of him. He will love you forever. Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> SC 18, <https://opc.org/sc.html>