



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Vindicating the Messiah

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John 12:37-50. If Jesus is the messiah, why was He so rejected? Many intelligent, well-educated people who knew the Scriptures listened to Jesus teach. Yet, by the end of His ministry, nearly everyone concluded this man definitely was not the Christ.

How could so many have been so wrong about Jesus? John's first-century readers had to wrestle with this question. They needed an answer, and John explains.

Two-hundred sixty years before the time of Christ, Carthage was an ancient city-state whose power ruled the Mediterranean. Rome, however, was on the rise. When the interests of the two clashed, they went to war three times in a series of battles that lasted from 264-146 B.C.—The Punic Wars.

Rome ultimately won and bitterly razed the city of Carthage, but nothing is certain in a century of war. Rome's greatest, most demoralizing threat came in 218 B.C. when Hannibal did the unthinkable. Despite the ice and cruel temperatures, he pressed his army over the Alps to land on the doorstep of his enemy. After losing nearly half his men, Hannibal still outmaneuvered and won victory after victory against Rome's superior forces.

The most astonishing battle was in 216 B.C. at Cannae. A Roman army more than 60% larger attacked Hannibal. When the smoke cleared, not only were Hannibal's losses small, he crushed the vast Roman army into insignificance. Terror seized Rome, and if ever Hannibal could have taken the city, this was his moment to strike. One of Hannibal's commanders even urged him to move quickly. Strike immediately. Destroy the city. Yet, he did not.

Hannibal waited, and according to the ancient historian Livy, "that day's delay is firmly believed to have been the preservation of the city and the empire."¹ When he possibly could've taken Rome, he wouldn't; and since he wouldn't, now he couldn't. Hannibal's window of opportunity opened for a brief time and closed never to open again.

No opportunity lasts forever. Like sands in an hourglass, the time to make any decision eventually runs out. Though hundreds-of-thousands had heard of Jesus over the span of His ministry, scarce few believed. The crowds and their leaders rejected His message repeatedly, and with each rejection their hearts grew harder. Impenetrably hard. John puts it this way: "they still did not believe... therefore they could not believe" (cf. John 12:37, 39). He's saying the window of opportunity for the crowds and their leaders had closed. Unlike Hannibal, they closed the door themselves.

Truth can only be rejected so many times before belief becomes impossible. Why? Because each rejection hardens the heart and strengthens the will. This is what happened when God sent His Son, but this does not explain why it happened. Why did God's people overwhelmingly reject their messiah?

HUMAN FACTORS

John begins by saying rejection was no surprise to God. He quotes Isaiah, who 700 years before the time of Christ, said that the messiah would be rejected (cf. John 9:38; Isa 53:1). Isaiah also said that the messiah would be despised, oppressed, cursed, beaten, and killed (cf. Isa 53:3-9; Zech 12:10). He would be a conquering king, but He would also be a suffering servant. In their longing for deliverance from Rome, God's people lost sight of the full picture.

This is part of the reason Jesus was rejected. Delving a bit deeper, John says the desire for glory kept many from the truth (cf. John 12:42-43). John noted this heart issue in 5:44 and 7:18. So many refused the messiah because they loved receiving praise from one another. The higher up one was in Jewish society, the greater the loss for following Jesus.

Remember the Pharisee Saul? When he came to Christ, his prestigious credentials were forfeit, his career was over, and he was excommunicated. He lost every friendship he had ever known. Belief in Jesus meant a total loss of glory for him (cf. Phil 3:4-8). Even the suggestion that God would ever become a man was absurd to Jews and Gentiles alike (cf. 1 Cor 1:22-23). It became all the more absurd after the messiah was publically crucified.²

Many were enamored with being somebody, having respect, hearing praise, etc. Though a number, even of the leaders, believed in Jesus on some level, it was eclipsed by their desire for glory. Some hearts were so hard, they had already conspired murder (cf. John 11:47-53). Others had some warmth towards Jesus, but it only lasted for a time. What was warm would soon grow cold as ice, and they would crucify the Lord of glory.

In contrast to Isaiah who, "saw His glory and spoke," so many in these final moments, "loved the glory that comes from man," and kept quiet (cf. John 12:41). They wouldn't publically identify themselves with the messiah and follow, for the love of earthly glory with its worldly treasures prevailed.

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: THURSDAYS AT 7:30AM, CAPITOL CHAPEL

JUSTICES AND STAFF: TUESDAYS AT 7:30AM, SUPREME COURT BUILDING

ILLINOIS

Vindicating the Messiah

AN ACT OF GOD

From a human standpoint, John says Jesus was rejected for two reasons. The first was theological: Wanting physical deliverance, the people believed their messiah would provide it. It was a liberation theology that didn't take into account the full picture of Old Testament prophecy. The second reason was spiritual: They loved the praise of men.

The divine side of unbelief is complex. John wants us to understand that messiah's rejection was part of God's sovereign design. The plan of salvation wasn't thwarted—God's plan actually included Jesus' rejection (cf. John 12:38, 40). Try to put your mind around that. It almost seems God kept His people from believing, that He prevented or predetermined their response.

God's people, like anyone else, had a responsibility to respond to Christ for salvation. They rejected Him, so God, "blinded their eyes and hardened their heart" all the more (cf. John 12:40). John isn't saying God kept them from believing as if they wanted salvation, and it was denied. They didn't want it, and so God intensified their rejection. Isn't this what the Lord did with Pharaoh? Pharaoh repeatedly hardened his heart against Moses, so God hardened his heart exceedingly more (cf. Ex 8:15, 32; 9:34; 10:1).

The harder Pharaoh's heart became, the more awesome and powerful God showed Himself to be (cf. Ex 9:16; Rom 9:17). What we find is that God received glory through Pharaoh, and Israel gained confidence that her God would fulfill His every promise. And what about Pharaoh? For his unbelief, he was reduced to an object lesson: Whether in someone's salvation or damnation, God will receive glory. God's glory is the end for which all things were created (cf. Rom 11:36).

SOME APPLES IN SCRIPTURE HANG LOW AND ARE EASY TO REACH. OTHERS REQUIRE GREAT EFFORT OR REMAIN BEYOND OUR GRASP.

THAT GOD IS INFINITE AND WE ARE NOT SHOULD LEAVE US CONFOUNDED AT TIMES.

Isaiah urged, "Seek the Lord while He may be found" (cf. Isa 55:6). Belief is not an eternal luxury. A time comes when rejection after rejection renders the message unbelievable. It is true that God shatters even the hardest heart at times (cf. Acts 9:1-5). It is also true He sometimes hardens it instead.

John wants us to understand that the cross wasn't a divine contingency plan. God knew His people would reject their messiah, and He purposed to use their rejection to fulfill the plan of salvation.

A FAITHFUL MESSENGER (JOHN 12:44-50)

John divided his Gospel into two parts: Chapters 1-12 and 13-21. At the end of this first part, he explains why Israel rejected Jesus and then gives a summary of Jesus' teaching. What does John want to impress upon us? That Jesus was sent from the Father and said exactly what the Father told Him.

The Son of God was a faithful messenger, and this wasn't the first time John made the point. In fact, he stresses throughout his Gospel that Jesus truly had been sent.³ Many false messiahs arose who took advantage of Israel's desire for freedom. Men such as Judas the Galilean and Athronges gained a following. In contrast to them, John says Jesus actually came from God.

How did John know Jesus had been sent from God? He was an eyewitness who heard Jesus' teachings and saw them supported by inexplicable miracles. Pseudo-messiahs were eloquent and sometimes able magicians. Yet, none of them ever attempted the things Jesus did. Who could fake the feeding of 5,000 families? Who could open the eyes of the blind or raise the dead? No one would ever attempt the miracles Jesus did or claim to rise from the dead, because the second he failed the game would have been over.

John says Jesus was sent from the Father with a message He so faithfully proclaimed. The apostle was convinced of this truth, so certain that he staked his own life upon it and suffered to defend it. The other apostles were just as convinced, and these men went to the ends of the earth telling the world about Jesus.

¹Livy, *The History of Rome in Three Volumes*, trans. D. Spillan (Houston, Tex.: Halycon Press, 2010), XXII:51.

²A 2nd century Roman guard room on Palatine Hill was excavated. Etched on the wall was a picture of one bowing before a man on a cross with the head of a jack ass. The Greek caption mockingly read: "Alexamenos worships his god." Such was the widespread stigma attached to Christianity.

³Variants of "send" appear 60 times in the Greek text of John's Gospel. That's nearly 3 times per chapter.