

Main Idea: According to John 12:34-41, when we look at Jesus rightly we see two things the natural man does not see.

Review: The previous context makes it clear that...

1. Jesus is a different kind of king (20-23).
2. Jesus established a different kind of kingdom (24-26).
3. Jesus offers a different view of suffering (27-29).
4. Jesus offers a different view of death (30-33).

I. When we look at Jesus rightly, we see the rejection of glory (34-36).

- A. The crowd is confused about Christ (34).
 1. They resist the thought of His crucifixion.
 2. They speculate about His identity.
- B. Christ gives counsel to the confused (35-36).
 1. Walk while you have light.
 2. Put your trust in the light.
 3. Become sons of the light.

II. When we look at Jesus rightly, we see the glory of rejection (37-41).

- A. We see the presence of unbelief (37).
- B. We see the prediction of unbelief (38).
- C. We see the divine purpose in the unbelief (39-40).
- D. We see the intended result of the unbelief, the glory of Jesus (41).

The Bottom Line: It boils down to this...

1. As sinners, we are all partners in the rejection of glory.
2. When grace does its work, we see the glory of rejection, and treasure it.

In case you haven't noticed, the battle for Christmas is raging. Last week I read some recent headlines and opening statements, taken from *The Faith Report*:¹

“Oklahoma Joins Merry Christmas Bill Parade.”

“Alabama Senator Pushes Merry Christmas Bill.”

“Dark Clouds Gathering Over Texas Merry Christmas Bill.”

“Wisconsin School District Cancels Christmas.”

“An atheist group has threatened to sue a school in West Columbia, S.C., for allowing its students to participate in Operation Christmas Child, a program that blesses needy children at Christmastime.”

“Student musicians at a South Carolina charter school will once again be able to play ‘Joy to the World’ after school officials lifted a ban on all religious Christmas music.”

“A Montana school choir is set to perform at a church despite calls from the American Civil Liberties Union and an atheist group to cancel the show, arguing that it violates the separation of church and state.”

So yes, there's a battle raging, the battle for Christmas. And while it's concerning to lose the right to have Christmas displays in public arenas, and so forth, I'm concerned about something much more fundamental. That's the answer to the question, how are we to make sense of what's happened, and is happening, to Jesus?

Think about it. God sent His Son into the world two thousand years ago. All He did was speak the truth and do unquestionable deeds of love and kindness. The effect? The world rejected Him and nailed Him to a cross.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹http://thefaithreport.com/?inf_contact_key=9a9c58300ef1e7f00af805661261660d2d81f31a85f30ea5cfc1e7e68539466e

The same thing is happening today. In the name of Jesus, truth is proclaimed and loving deeds of kindness are done by followers of Christ, and yet the world bristles and seeks to eliminate these followers and the Savior they represent.

The question is, what does this relentless battle say to us, not about the rejecting world, but about the rejected Savior? Did the rejection then, and the continuing rejection by so many now, indicate that He's weak, or that He underestimated the human problem, or that His plan has gone haywire?

How are we to make sense of the fact that the battle for Christmas exists in the first place, then and now? And is the Lord powerless to do anything about this rejection, other than sit back and hope things take a turn for the better?

The Word of God addresses that question for us in no uncertain terms, in this morning's text, John 12. It's my privilege to set the record straight at the outset. The Living God is not weak, nor frustrated, nor uncertain regarding the world's rejection of His Son. He is the Sovereign of the universe, and is putting His glory on display as He ordained from eternity past, not in spite of the rejection, but *through* it. Yes, *through* it.

In today's text, we're going to see two themes that actually run throughout the Gospel of John, from Jesus' birth all the way to His cross. It's why Christmas is so wonderful to us, and offensive to so many others. According to John 12:34-41, when we look at Jesus rightly we see two things the natural man does not see.

We see, one, *the rejection of glory*, and two, *the glory of rejection*.

By *the rejection of glory* I'm referring to the rejection of the Glorious One (John uses the term "glory" and its cognates throughout his gospel and particularly this section in reference to Jesus). And by *the glory of rejection* I have in mind how God used the very rejection of men to bring about the intended glorifying of His Son.

We need to set the backdrop before we can appreciate this fully.

The context of today's text begins at the start of chapter 12. You'll see the battle raging even there, as Mary anoints Jesus with costly perfume, and Judas objects to the costly waste (1-8). Then, on the next day, King Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a donkey, to the Hosanna cries of the Jewish crowd (13), and to the spiteful muttering of the hateful Pharisees (19).

And then John introduces us to an intriguing set of characters. In verse 21, some *non-Jews, Greeks*, John calls them, requested an audience with Jesus. "Sir," they said to Philip, "we would like to see Jesus."

What's intriguing isn't so much their request (everybody seemed to want Jesus' time), but Jesus' response to their request. In fact, John doesn't even tell us whether the Greeks ever met Jesus. That doesn't seem to matter. But what's of eternal significance is what Jesus *said* and *did* next.

What He *did*, as we'll see before the chapter ends, is hide (36) and head to the cross. What He *said*, in verses 20-33, teaches us four powerful lessons about Jesus.

Review: The previous context makes it clear that...

1. *Jesus is a different kind of king (20-23)*. When He heard that the Greeks wanted to see Him, Jesus responded, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Why did He say *that*? Because this is why He has come, not just to be a parochial, Jewish Messiah, but a Messiah for the peoples of the whole world. And now they're beginning to come to Him, non-Jews. And now He's beginning to receive the glory He deserves.

But how will He receive glory? Here's another evidence that He's a different kind of king. He receives His glory *by dying*. Glory through dying. In verse 26 He says a kernel of wheat must *die* if it's going to produce a harvest, and that's why He has come, to die, so as to produce a maximum harvest.

Yet this isn't just for Him. It's for His people too. Because...

2. *Jesus established a different kind of kingdom (24-26)*. Anyone may enter His kingdom, Jew or Greek or Barbarian, for that matter. But to enter, a person must die, and hate this present world, and become a servant, and learn to follow Him, the Master. These are the non-negotiable values of His kingdom, dying to self, hating this world, serving, following, waiting for future glory.

3. *Jesus offers a different view of suffering (27-29)*. "Now is my heart troubled," He confesses in verse 27, "and what shall I say?" He asks. When the natural man has a troubled heart, he knows exactly what to say to God. "Give me some peace! Fix this troubled heart!" "Father, save me from this hour?" Is that what Jesus said?

No. Jesus operates by a different view of suffering. "It was for this very reason I came to this hour." There's Jesus' view of suffering. It's necessary. Indeed, it's the means that His Father has chosen to bring about maximum benefit and glory.

"Father, glorify your name!" says Jesus. There's the path to the fullest experience of joy. When God gets the glory, His Son experiences His fullest joy. And that's true for the rest of His sons and daughters, too.

We don't love suffering. But we see suffering, and particularly, glorifying God in our suffering, as the path that leads to the highest eternal gain possible.

"I have glorified it, and will glorify it again," said the Father to His Son in verse 28. At which point Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine." Though the crowd didn't understand the words, they couldn't miss heaven's thunderous response to the Savior's devotion to His Father's glory.

At that point Jesus said, "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." Why did Jesus say that? Because...

4. *Jesus offers a different view of death (30-33)*. He didn't live to avoid death, but embraced it. Why? Because, as He says here, He knew that His death would accomplish three things of eternal significance. By His death, one, He would render judgment on this rebellious world; two, He would drive out the prince of this world, the devil; and three, He would draw all kinds of men to Himself, Greeks/Jews, rich/poor, educated/uneducated, religious/pagan, and form a new people called His church.

Those are staggering words, aren't they? We're seeing a Jesus so many at this Christmas season don't know—a different kind of king, with a different kind of kingdom, and a different view of suffering and death. Put all this together and you see the path that leads to maximum glory.

And what kind of effect does this Jesus have on the world? That's what we see next in the text. When we look at Jesus rightly, we see *the rejection of glory* and *the glory of rejection*.

I. When we look at Jesus rightly, we see the rejection of glory (34-36).

Notice, verse 34, “The crowd spoke up, ‘We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this ‘Son of Man’?’” Don’t miss that...

A. The crowd is confused about Christ (34). First of all...

1. *They resist the thought of His crucifixion.* Keep in mind these are people who know their Bibles. They mention “the law” here, but they’re using the term in the sense of “the Scriptures,” for the texts they have in mind are not in the Pentateuch, but later (probably Ps 89:36; 110:4; Isa 9:7; Dan 7:14). They say, “The Law says the Son of Man must remain forever, not be lifted up.”

In other words, they don’t want a Messiah that’s going to die. They see no point in that. And that’s because they don’t see themselves as needing a dying Messiah. They’re good people, working their way to heaven by their good deeds.

My friend, if that’s the way you see yourself, you too will resist the very thought of Christ’s crucifixion. Not so much that He died, but that He died *for me*. “I don’t need anybody to die for me. I’m a good person. Surely God knows that.”

But it’s not just the cross that creates confusion.

2. *They speculate about His identity.* “Who is this ‘Son of Man’,” they ask. The title “Son of man” appears over 80 times in the four gospels. It’s Jesus’ favorite self-designation. It’s a messianic title that comes from Daniel 7:14, and it identifies what a sinful world desperately needed, a God-sent, Son *of man*. Someone who could identify with us as humanity, but not be identified with our sin problem.

That’s who Jesus is, the sinless God-man. And that made no sense to this crowd. Hence their resistance and questioning. Perhaps you can relate. What you’ve learned about Jesus intrigues you. But it also disturbs you. If what He said is true, about Himself, about you and the rest of the world, you must come to grips with Him, and you’re not quite sure about that.

Leon Morris says, “This is the last mention of the crowd in Jesus’ ministry. It is significant that to the end they remain confused and perplexed, totally unable to appreciate the magnitude of the gift that is offered them, nor the significance of the Person who offers it.”²

Notice what happens next in the story. Having heard the confused crowd...

B. Christ gives counsel to the confused (35-36). From this point to the end of the chapter, we’re going to see Christ’s final appeal to Israel, in what MacArthur calls “a summary of His entire public ministry.”³ One final invitation, as it were.

Here it is, verses 35-36, “Then Jesus told them, ‘You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.’”

There’s the Savior’s counsel to the confused. Three instructions.

1. *Walk while you have light.* It’s interesting how the light metaphor is central to the Christmas story. The shepherds followed the *light* to find the newborn king. Similarly, the magi followed the *light* in the sky to find the Christ-child. In John 1:4 He calls Christ “the light of the world,” and immediately says, “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it (John 1:5).”

² Morris, p. 600.

³ MacArthur, p. 49.

For 33 years they didn't understand it. Now Jesus says, "Just a little while longer. That's all the time you have left to see the light." The cross is just days away, then the resurrection, and then He's going back to heaven.

Friends, there's a lesson here for us, too. As Morris rightly observes, "If we do not use the light we lose it."⁴ Jesus said, *Walk while you have the light. And specifies, before the darkness overtakes you.*

You say, "It's all so confusing to me. I mean, there are so many religions and denominations. I'd rather just not think about it. Is that an option?"

Not according to Jesus. Why not? He says in verse 35, "The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going."

We don't think much about walking in the dark...because we have electric lights. We can move around in our houses day or night because we just flip a switch, and we're fine. There were no switches to flip when Jesus said this, and His hearers couldn't miss the point.

If you don't have light, you don't walk in the dark. And if you do, you'll kill yourself. You'll run into things, or fall over things, or get run over by things. It's what you don't see and know that will kill you.

So, friends, you can't avoid dealing with the light. The alternative is deadly. The solution? According to Jesus...

2. *Put your trust in the light.* That's what He told the confused crowd in verse 36, "Put your trust in the light." And notice the next phrase, "while you have it."

It's crunch time for this crowd. They've been looking at the light for some time now, and they're about to lose this privilege. The needed response? More analysis? More applauding and waving palm branches? More question-asking? No. *Trust.* It's time to *put your trust* in the light you've been seeing. *Believe in*, says the ESV and NASB.

And what happens if you do? Those who do...

3. *Become sons of the light.* Don't miss the verb tenses here. As Morris points out, "'Believe' [trust] in the present tense gives the thought of a continuous belief, whereas 'become' in the aorist points to a once-for-all becoming sons of light. While faith is an activity to be practiced without ceasing one does not become a son of light by degrees."⁵

You either are or are not a son of the light, and becoming one is not a process.

How'd this crowd respond to Jesus' invitation? You'll see the particulars in the rest of the chapter and book, but it boils to this, *the rejection of glory.* John concludes verse 36 with this explanation, "When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them."

You say, "That's terrible! After all God did, sending the light into the world, and the world rejected it! That must really frustrate God." Wrong. Yes, the rejection of glory is terrible. But God is not frustrated, or confused, or helpless. In reality, He's doing precisely what He set out to do, put on display His glory to the max.

You see, it's not the end of the story yet, and that's the point John makes in the next passage in our text. When we look at Jesus rightly, yes, we see, first, the rejection of glory. But keep looking.

⁴ Morris, p. 600.

⁵ Morris, p. 601.

II. When we look at Jesus rightly, we see the glory of rejection (37-41).

I want to take you to the end of this passage, and then back up and work through it. Notice verse 41, “Isaiah said this. Stop for a moment. Said what? The two messianic prophecies that John cites in verses 37-40. And what are the prophecies about? The key word in this section, verses 37-49, is *believe*. John uses the term eight times.⁶ And that’s what Israel *didn’t* do when the light came. They didn’t believe, just like Isaiah said they wouldn’t 700 years ahead of time.

So why did Isaiah say this? Here’s John’s answer, at the end of verse 41 “Because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.”

What did Isaiah see? You say, “He saw the glory of Messiah Jesus.” That’s true, but it’s more specific than that. John says He saw the glory *of the rejection* of the Messiah.

You say, “How can the Messiah’s rejection be a glorious thing?” In itself, it’s not. But the unbelief is part of a process that the Almighty works through to display His glory.

It’s amazing to watch God work. Because He’s the Sovereign One, He can bring good out of man’s rejection, which He does. In Romans 11:11, Paul says it was “by Israel’s transgression [that] salvation has come to the Gentiles.”

So how does God turn the rejection of glory into the glory of rejection? To answer that, let’s back up and walk through the preceding text. We see four things pertaining to unbelief in verses 37-40.

A. We see the presence of unbelief (37). “Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.”

It wasn’t for the lack of evidence. The light appeared. The miracles were plain to see. The proper response was to believe. But they, the Jewish multitudes, didn’t believe.

Did this unbelief catch the Lord by surprise? No.

B. We see the prediction of unbelief (38). “This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: ‘Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’”

John here cites a prophecy from Isaiah 53:1, a prediction that Isaiah recorded some seven centuries before it happened. Don’t miss the location in Isaiah, chapter 53. That’s the chapter that predicts that God’s Messiah is going to suffer as a substitute for sinners, that God is going to place their sin on the sinless Savior and judge Him in their behalf.

This Messiah is going to come to earth, and who will believe in Him? His own people won’t. But this unbelief, this *predicted* unbelief, though inexcusable, will actually accomplish a divine purpose.

C. We see the divine purpose in the unbelief (39-40). “For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: ‘He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.’”

Don’t miss the strong language. *For this reason*. The Sovereign Lord has a purpose for all that happens in His universe, including the unbelief of sinners. I cannot explain that fully, but we must affirm it, for it’s Bible truth.

Notice the next phrase. “For this reason they *could not believe*.” John doesn’t merely say the Jews *didn’t* believe, but *could not* believe. I take that to mean they resisted the light time and time again and reached the point where they *couldn’t* believe.

⁶ Observation by Wiersbe, p. 343.

MacArthur explains, “It is a sobering reality that those who persistently harden their hearts against God may find themselves hardened by Him.”⁷ That’s what happened to these first century Jews.

Wiersbe remarks, “When a person starts to resist the light, something begins to change within him; and he comes to the place where he cannot believe.”⁸

You say, “Why couldn’t they believe?” John answers that question by citing another prophecy of Isaiah, this one from Isaiah 6:10. “They could not believe, *because* [here’s the reason], as Isaiah says elsewhere.”

Stop there for a moment. Before we look at *what* Isaiah said, think about *when* he said it. This comes from chapter six. That’s the chapter that records Isaiah’s call to the ministry. How does Isaiah 6 begin? With Isaiah saying, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple (1).” Isaiah saw the display of the glory of the Lord!

On that day the Lord cleansed Isaiah and then called Isaiah into His service. He commissioned him to go and preach to His wayward people. But He told Isaiah right up front. They *won’t believe*.

Why not? Here’s the answer. It’s in the verse John quotes in our text. It’s God speaking. “He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.”

There’s why they can’t believe. They’ve past the point of returning. They’ve heard God call them time after time after time, exhorting them to repent and believe. But they refused. It’s the rejection of glory.

So the Lord says, “That’s it. From this point on I will blind their eyes and deaden their hearts, so they *cannot* see and understand and return to Me and be healed by Me.”

He did that in Isaiah’s day. And by quoting Isaiah, John is saying, He’s done the same in our day. *For this reason they could not believe*.

While it may sound odd at first, this is actually a very hope-giving piece of revelation. As William Hendricksen says, “This purpose clause is, after all, very comforting. It shows that Israel’s rejection of the Christ was not a frustration of God’s plan.”⁹

So why would the Lord of glory invite people to believe, watch them reject His glorious invitation, and then harden them so they could not believe? Here’s the answer John gives. In verse 41...

D. We see the intended result of the unbelief, the glory of Jesus (41). “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.”

Remember, John is writing this gospel to convince people they should believe that Jesus is the Christ, so that by believing, they may have eternal life.

Here’s a potential objection. “Why should I believe in a God who couldn’t pull off His plan the first time? He sent His Son into the world, and the world rejected Him. Can I trust someone like that with my eternal soul and destiny?”

You can, says John, and here’s why. The rejection of glory did not catch the God of glory off guard. To the contrary, 700 years ahead of time He allowed His servant, Isaiah, to see and record this stunning reality. The rejection of glory would be the instrument

⁷ MacArthur, p. 54.

⁸ Wiersbe, p. 343.

⁹ William Hendricksen, p. 211.

that God would use to put on display His fullest expression of glory, what I've been calling, *the glory of rejection*.

Let me say it another way. The prophet Isaiah saw and predicted the *suffering* of the Messiah, which he describes in chapter 53. But he also saw His *glory*, says John. He saw it at his call in chapter 6 ("I saw the Lord high and exalted" 6:1-5) and throughout his book (9:6-7; 52:13-15; 53:10-12).

But the two aren't unrelated. It's not just that Isaiah saw the Messiah's suffering *and* glory. He saw that the Messiah's suffering would be the means *through which* He would experience the fullest expression of His glory, which is the *glory of His grace*.

My friend, that's why they're singing in heaven (Rev 5:9, 12). And to whom are they singing, and for what accomplishment? "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain." The rejection of glory has become the glory of rejection.

Commenting on verse 41 Leon Morris remarks, "Again we have the complex idea of glory. It points at once to the supreme greatness of Christ and the cross as the supreme illustration of His greatness. Here it includes the thought of His rejection, for that, too, is part of His real glory. He being what He is stooped to a position where men might and did reject Him. Only as we see this can we see what His glory implies."

By the way, this is what glory looks like for His followers, too. It's through stooping, through willingly enduring rejection, that we walk in our Savior's steps in ways ordained by our Heavenly Father, and thereby put His glory, the *glory of rejection*, on display.

So as the battle for Christmas rages, this is what we must remember, who Jesus really is. He's not merely some quaint little baby in a manger that you can take or leave. No, no. He is the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth who has purposed to work through the rejection of glory to bring about the glory of rejection.

The Bottom Line: It boils down to this...

1. *As sinners, we are all partners in the rejection of glory.* Not just those who cried out, "Crucify Him!" And not just those who nailed Him to the tree. We are all partners in this unthinkable crime of rejecting the Glorious One.

However...

2. *When grace does its work, we see the glory of rejection, and treasure it.* Has divine grace performed this work in your heart and life? You say, "How can I be sure?" Answer this. What do you think of the cross and the One who died there? Do you treasure it, and Him? Do you glory in His rejection, and what He accomplished by it, namely, the salvation of your soul? Is so, you too are heading for glory, no matter who you are and what you've done.