

BELIEVE IN THE LIGHT

John 12:34-50

Key Verse: 12:36a

“Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.”

This passage is the word of Christ preached in his last public discourse. Beginning with John 13, we see Jesus spending time with his disciples and praying for them. Afterwards, he would go through much suffering and die on the cross as the Lamb of God. Then he would rise from the dead, defeating sin and death. Finally, the Risen Christ would appear to his disciples and serve them breakfast at the beach and restore their love relationship with him.

In today’s passage, Jesus urges us to believe in the light while we have the light. In a sense, this is a summary of what Jesus preached thus far. Believing in Jesus is the only way to become the children of light and the children of God. And believing in Jesus is believing in God. May God help us to hear his word and believe!

First, the Son of Man must be lifted up. Look at verse 34. *The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, “The Son of Man must be lifted up”? Who is this ‘Son of Man’?”* As we learned last week, Jesus taught the principle of a kernel of wheat when some Greeks came to see him in Jerusalem. Soon Jesus would become a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground. He would die as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His death would bring life to the mankind destined to eternal condemnation because of their sin. Jesus also encouraged his followers to live the life of a kernel of wheat. He gave the promise, “Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (25). Then he said in verse 32, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die (33). Jesus knew that he would be crucified as the Lamb of God. Crucifixion was a very cruel, if not the most cruel, way to execute a person. The Romans would not allow their citizens to be executed in this way. But Jesus’ hands and feet would be nailed to the wooden cross and his naked body would be lifted up for the world to see. Knowing this, his soul was troubled. But he made a decision to be a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies. He prayed, “Father, glorify your name!” (28)

The crowd who heard him spoke up. They didn’t understand what Jesus meant when he said, “The Son of Man must be lifted up.” They were confused about a couple of things. First, they had heard from their rabbis that the Messiah would remain forever. So the Messiah being lifted up and dying didn’t make sense to them. In fact, there are references in the Old Testament about this (Ps 110:4, Isa 9; Eze 37:25). It is true that the kingdom of Christ will endure forever. Their problem was that they did not study the word of God carefully. If they had, they would have known about the prophecies concerning the sufferings of Christ. The prophet Isaiah prophesied about Jesus’ suffering in Isaiah 53:3-6: “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering

and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Jesus would be gloried by God. God would lift him up from the earth; he would sit on his heavenly throne. But he had to suffer first to be the Lamb of God. The glory of the Messiah would come after the cross. However, the Jews did not like the idea of messiah who would suffer and die, because such messiah could not free them from the Roman Empire. They had their own expectations about the Messiah. And they didn't like what Jesus said about the Messiah. This wasn't the first time Jesus told them about his upcoming suffering and death. In John 2, Jesus cleansed the temple area that was bustling with commercial activities. The Jews asked him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19). Jesus also said in John 3, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (Jn 3:14-15). But the Jews didn't like a suffering messiah. So they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. Instead, they asked, “Who is this ‘Son of Man’?” They didn't want such helpless messiah.

Second, believe in the light. It must have been difficult for Jesus to endure the Jews whose hearts were hardened. As a teacher and a preacher, I know what it feels like when what I say falls on deaf ears. Jesus' heart was broken when they refused to believe in him. Still, he did not give up on them. He cared about them deeply. Look at 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. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.”* When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them. “Walk in the light”—this is one of the major themes of John's gospel and Jesus' teaching. John 1:3-4 declares: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” John also declared, “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (1:9).

Jesus himself declared: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). He also said in John 9:5, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” The message is loud and clear. Jesus is the light. Without Jesus guiding us in our life, we cannot help but groping in the darkness of sin. We may struggle very hard to go somewhere in our life, but we cannot see where we are going. More seriously, if we fail to commit our lives to Jesus and follow him, we become the children of darkness. Sadly, we often want to stay in darkness. Why? Darkness is a cover for our sins. We feel comfortable to remain under the cover. John 3:19 says: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” Light exposes everything, both

good and bad. Those who do evil hate light because they know their deeds will be exposed by the light. We learn here that we sinners have two choices. One is to come to the light of Jesus so that we don't have to grope in darkness any longer. It requires our courage to do this. It requires our decision. But it is the choice that gives us life. The other choice is to remain in darkness so as to enjoy sin a bit longer. But sooner or later, we will stumble if we walk in darkness without the light of Jesus. May God help us to make a decision to accept Jesus into our lives and walk in his light, while we have the light, that is, before we die when we will not have the opportunity to accept him into our lives!

What does it mean to walk in the light? How can we walk in the light? Before Jesus found me and saved this sinner, I was walking in darkness, without even realizing it. I was a young man with no sense of problem about life and death. I just followed the flow of this world and my desires. I thought I was going somewhere, but I wasn't, because my life lacked a clear direction and purpose. In fact, I was lost in darkness. Only by the grace of God, Jesus found me. He shined his light on my life and I could clearly see how I was groping in the darkness of sin. In his great mercy, God led me to Jesus. He helped me to live by the word of God, that is, the light of truth. He helped to realize that to walk in the light of Jesus is to walk in the word of God in fellowship with Christ. This world is ruled by the prince of darkness. So if we follow the trend of this world and its value system, we walk in darkness. One of the reasons why young people are attracted to big cities is the night life that offer. It is a lot of fun, they would say. Many bad things, sinful things happen at night. Such life may be a lot of fun, but it leads to death. That's why Jesus says, *"Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you."* He also says, *"Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light"* (36a).

Third, belief and unbelief. Look at verses 37-41. *Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. 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?" For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them." Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.*

These prophecies of Isaiah are found in Isaiah 53:1 ("Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?") and Isaiah 6:10 which says: "Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." Some people might ask, "Well, if the Jews could not believe because God hardened their hearts, should they be held accountable?" Only those who don't know God and his heart would ask such question. God really wanted his people to hear his words, repent their sins of idolatry and return to him. He really wanted them to listen to his words. But they would not, did not listen to him. They turned blind eyes and deaf ears to God and his words. The prophet Isaiah experienced this personally. He tried very hard to deliver God's words to his people, but no one was willing to listen to him. So Isaiah's words in these verses were lamentations about the

closed hearts of his people. God hardened their hearts because they repeatedly refused to believe in Jesus, not the other way around. John says in verse 41, “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.” Jesus quoted the words of Isaiah when the Jews refused to listen to him. I think Jesus was comforted by Isaiah’s lamentations (Mk 4:12; Lk 8:10).

Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him (37). This means that the Jews refused to believe in Jesus despite the clear evidence they saw with their own eyes. This shows that unbelief is not an intellectual problem. Rather, it is a problem of the heart. People with very little education can and do believe in Jesus when they open their hearts to him and his words. Once Jesus lamented over the unbelief of people, saying, “You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? (Mk 9:19). In response, a boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” He prayed to the Lord to help him overcome his unbelief. Likewise, we should pray to God that he may help us to have receptive hearts to hear Jesus and believe in him.

There is no doubt the unbelief of the Jews broke Jesus’ heart. We also live in an unbelieving generation. More people spurn the word of God than believe in Jesus. As disciples of Jesus, it is disappointing to see this as we struggle to serve the ministry of the word of God. But we should not lose our hearts. There are always some people who put their faith in Jesus. Look at verses 42-43. *Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God.* Nicodemus was probably one of them. Joseph of Arimathea was another (Jn 19:38-39). They were Jewish leaders who believed in Jesus, although they would remain as closet Christians because of their fear of the religious leaders, until Jesus’ crucifixion touched their hearts.

Fourth, the one who sees Jesus is seeing God. Look at verses 44-45. *Then Jesus cried out, “Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me.”* This is not a new message of Jesus. One question here is, where did Jesus preach this message and to whom? We don’t know, because verse 36 says that after he had finished speaking about walking in the light, Jesus left and hid himself from the crowd. We don’t know where he went. So we don’t know to whom he cried out when he said, *“Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me.”* Given the absence of a specific time and space context, we should accept this teaching as the truth that applies to all of us. And what is the message? Whoever believes in Jesus does not believe in him only, but in God. The one who sees Jesus is seeing God. He is saying, “Do you want to see God? Then see me.” This truth is also repeated in John’s gospel. John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” Jesus himself declared, “I and the Father are one” (10:30) and “... the Father is in me, and I in the Father” (10:39).

Jesus also said, *“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness”* (46). This is also a familiar message. He

continues in verses 47-50: *“If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day. For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”* Jesus came to this world, not to judge the world, but to save the world. He came to save us and to give us eternal life. But those who reject Jesus and refuse to accept his words will be condemned at the last day. This is the message we must accept and believe.

In conclusion, let us remember two things from today’s passage. First, Jesus is the light. We should walk in the light, while we still can, so that we may not stumble. Second, unbelief is a serious problem. Jesus came to save the world, but many people reject him. Jesus says, “Walk in the light,” but many people insist on staying in darkness. May God help us not to harden our hearts when we hear the word of Christ! Let us accept the word of Jesus and believe in him so that we may have eternal life!