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## Be Thou My Vision John 12:36b-41

**Intro:** Last time, we discussed the Lord's last sermon to Israel – at least, it's the last public sermon John records in his Gospel. This final sermon contained a reminder of Jesus' teaching, a challenge to respond to Him, a warning to those who refused to respond and a promise to all those who would. This sermon concludes the middle section of John's Gospel, a section in which Jesus began to call a people to Himself out of Judaism. The next section ([ch13](#) - [ch17](#)) contains Jesus' private teachings to the disciples. Thus, there are no more public invitations to come to Him.

Despite this good ending, John seems reluctant to conclude this section without a few summarizing comments. So, the end of [ch12](#) is comprised of a 3-part conclusion: 1) an analysis of Israel's unbelievable unbelief; 2) recognition that despite this, some did believe; 3) a resume of the entirety of the Lord's teaching. These topics will take up our next 2 studies because they contain some material that is puzzling to most people, even disconcerting, as well as some statements that give us a peak into what John the Apostle believed concerning the glory of Jesus Christ.

**36b-38-** We've seen references throughout John's Gospel to the stubborn unbelief of the Jews so it's not surprising that, here at the end of the Lord's public ministry, John reminds us of it once more. It's both an unbelievable fact and an absolute truth that Israel not only refused to accept God's promised Messiah, they actually killed Him.

The scope of Israel's unbelief escapes us today, being so far removed from it but, it didn't escape the 1<sup>st</sup> century preachers, most of whom were Jews. In fact, it became a great source of bewilderment and grief for them. These early believers had lived their lives in light of the OT prophecies and so knew that God's Messiah would come and bless Israel. They also knew that Jesus was clearly this Messiah. Obviously, Israel should have believed on Jesus and welcomed Him gladly. Instead, Israel seemed to be rejecting Jesus while Gentiles were increasingly responding to Him. Why is this? Has God changed His mind and cast off His people? Was God taken by surprised by Israel's rejection? Paul says in Romans that God hasn't cast off

Israel but has allowed them to fall into unbelief for a time so that His grace in Christ could be extended to the Gentiles and to a remnant chosen out of Israel.

This is exactly the problem John is dealing with in our text. He doesn't go into as much detail as Paul does but he does answer it. Why did the nation of Israel as a whole refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah? Answer: their unbelief was in accordance with OT prophecy. This is a tremendously significant prophecy that opens the magnificent 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah. It begins by asking 2 questions: Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? The answers are: No one and everyone! Isaiah goes on to list the consequences of the failure to believe. Messiah came but He was "despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief...He was despised and we did not esteem Him." (*Isa 53:3*). This is all the more incredible since Messiah would speak such great words and perform such great deeds.

This prophecy presents 2 sides of the divine testimony: the message of the Servant of God which appealed to the inward perception of truth and the signs of the power of God which appealed outwardly to all who saw them. In both respects, the testimony failed to be accepted. The message was not believed; the signs were not interpreted! John shows this to be the case when he declares that Jesus spoke wisely (*36b*) and acted powerfully (*37*); but the people of Israel as a whole refused to respond to Him.

John's quote cannot be taken in any way that would lessen the responsibility of the Jews for their own disobedience.

It's true that their disobedience fulfilled Scripture. It's also true that because of their disobedience, God increasingly blinded their eyes so that they could not see or understand or be converted (*39-40*). But, this does not mean that they were not responsible before God for their lack of response to Jesus. John here, in no way, minimizes human responsibility. Thus, the tone of the text is really one of amazement that Israel could actually have disbelieved, especially after Jesus had taught so persuasively and had performed so many powerful miracles in their presence.

**39-40**- John's gone and done it now! He might not have been minimizing human responsibility with his first quote but surely he is here, right? Doesn't this reference explicitly say that God blinded their eyes and hardened their

hearts precisely so that they wouldn't see, understand or turn to Jesus?  
How can their disobedience be their own fault?

This is a good question and it has several good answers. Above all else, let me just state that if God chooses to intervene in a certain way in a person's life to harden them so that they cannot believe in Jesus, then God is still right in doing so. **If** this is what God actually does (IF), then God is just and no man has any grounds to rebuke Him. If God hardens hearts so that people cannot believe and are judged for it, then that's the way it is and God is guiltless. We are in no position to stand in judgment of God by our limited wisdom and woefully inadequate standards.

But, is this what God does? Is this what our text teaches? No. First off, this is not what the Bible as a whole teaches. It's not that men are able to choose God but God closes the minds of some who don't believe and are condemned. The Bible is clear in teaching that all men begin by being unable to choose God yet, God graciously intervenes to open their eyes to the truth and embrace it and as a result, they are saved. Thus, in terms of salvation, it's hardly necessary for God to blind anyone. We begin blind and only come to Jesus when God intervenes to give us sight.

Secondly, our text reveals an entirely different sequence of events. John doesn't begin with the quote in **vs40**; he begins by stating that even though Jesus performed many miracles, "they did not believe in Him." He begins with their unbelief! It's only after this that he says God hardened their hearts; meaning this is a judicial act. At first, they would not believe; afterwards, they could not believe.

Finally, we can't fault God's blinding as the reason for their unbelief because of what Jesus said in His last sermon. There, Jesus warned His listeners not to reject the light, saying that if they rejected the light, an even greater darkness would come upon them. This is not a darkness that causes unbelief but a darkness that results from it. It is a working out of God's just laws, by which faith leads to even greater faith and unbelief to even greater unbelief.

In all this, there is a solemn affirmation of human responsibility and an even more solemn warning of what happens when the light of God goes unheeded. Because of her unbelief God gave Israel up to a deep darkness.

Because of unbelief God has also promised to give the Gentile world up to a “strong delusion, that they should believe the lie” (2 Thess 2:11). Could that be true of you? If so, be warned by this teaching, and don’t trivialize the overtures of God’s love for you or His great grace that is extended towards you.

This passage presents a difficult subject for it speaks both of the sovereignty of God in the affairs of men as well as human responsibility. Now, the sovereignty of God is something we have no control over and only possess a limited understanding of at best. But, human responsibility is something that should concern each of us personally because everybody will be personally responsible for their own lives and choices before a just and holy God.

**41-** The Book of John is filled with many extraordinary verses and none more so than the verse we’ve come to now. Here, John refers to one of the most glorious visions of God ever given to a human being – the vision Isaiah received at the beginning of his prophetic ministry, when he sees Jehovah sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, with the train of His robe filling the temple. The amazing thing is that John now applies this amazing vision to Jesus Himself!

This reference may seem natural to us who have been conditioned by centuries of Christian theology which ascribes full divinity to Jesus Christ. But it wasn’t natural for John, who was a Jew; nor was it natural to his contemporaries. For the Jews of that day, God had become something almost inaccessible and incomprehensible. God was the Holy One of Israel who dwelt in unapproachable glory. No one actually saw Him. When the occasional extraordinary figure like Moses or Isaiah was given a vision of God in His glory, it wasn’t even considered a viewing of God Himself but merely an image of Him. Even this was extraordinarily wonderful! Yet, no vision was as glorious as the one received by Isaiah and it’s this very vision that John blithely applies to Jesus. He takes the most exalted portrait of Jehovah in the OT and says it is a portrait of the humble carpenter from Nazareth. That’s how great his opinion was of Jesus!

This isn’t the only time in John’s Gospel that Jesus has been called God. we saw it in the very first verse (1:1). Jesus applied this truth to Himself in 8:58 when He declared, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” But nothing quite equals

John's astounding reference to Jesus here. But, in order to fully understand its significance we must determine exactly what it was that Isaiah saw when he saw His glory and spoke of Him. To do that properly, we must turn to [Isa 6:1-4](#).

This is the full record of Isaiah's vision and it contains 4 elements. 1<sup>st</sup>, there's the vision of the Lord Himself, high and lifted up. 2<sup>nd</sup>, there's the view of His train filling the temple. 3<sup>rd</sup>, there's a picture of the angelic beings who attend to God and do His bidding. 4<sup>th</sup>, there's a demonstration of worship.

The sovereignty of God is embodied in the picture of the Lord seated on a throne, high and lifted up. This emphasizes the fact that God and God alone is in control of all things and is always in control on them. The reference to the death of King Uzziah is important for it was in that year Isaiah received this vision. Uzziah had been a good king for Judah who had enjoyed a long rule (52 yrs) during which time a measure of the righteousness and prosperity enjoyed under David and Solomon was restored to the kingdom. Isaiah had grown up during the later years of this good king but eventually, Uzziah went the way of all the earth: he contracted leprosy and died. He was succeeded by a young, inexperienced 25 yr old man while trouble was brewing in the north in the form of an increasingly belligerent and powerful Syria which would, in time, overrun the northern kingdom of Israel and threaten Judah.

When Uzziah died, it's not hard to picture Isaiah mourning the loss and despairing over what the future might hold. It was precisely at this time that God revealed Himself to Isaiah as the One who was still on the throne. Uzziah may have died but Jehovah still lived. Uzziah may have yielded his throne to another but Jehovah still reigned! God, not man, was in control. Thus, Isaiah didn't need to fear but could trust God in spite of the circumstances. That's exactly what Isaiah did! God's sovereignty was the basis of Isaiah's later preaching and it was the secret of his strength. Jeremiah faced many difficult tasks. He knew the greatness of Israel's God, as Isaiah did. Yet Jeremiah complained and drew back and sometimes doubted. Isaiah never complained; nor did he ever doubt. He had peace even in storm, and the secret behind it all was his assurance of the sovereignty of God as revealed in this vision. Isaiah recognized the importance of this truth, he grabbed a hold of it at the very start and it transformed his ministry.

The next thing Isaiah noticed was God's train (robe) and the fact that it filled the entire temple. This teaches us that there is room for no one else at the highest pinnacle of the universe. It's not just that Jehovah reigns; it's that no one else reigns beside Him or in opposition to Him. It's not just that Jesus Christ is Lord; it's that no one else is Lord.

Is this true for us personally? Is Jesus Lord in our lives? Does His train fill the temple of your soul? Or is He forced to compete with our own conflicting loyalties? Does He just occupy a corner of the throne room while we crowd other things in there too? Some people insist on crowding in their own plans for their lives then can't understand why their lives are cluttered, disorganized and have no meaning. If this is you, you need to learn to let things go. Let Jesus have His rightful place. Allow Him to be what He must be and certainly will be one day – Lord of all (**Phil 2:9-11**)!

The next element of Isaiah's vision is the angelic beings that served God (**2**). Placement of their wings is significant. In covering their faces, they were reverent – not even considering themselves worthy to gaze upon God. Covering their feet speaks of self-effacement. These creatures are glorious in their own right but they covered their glory because they didn't want any eyes on themselves, only on God. The wings they used to fly with speak of service – they used them to do God's bidding. Do you want to serve the Lord? Here's a picture of what's required: humility, self-effacement and a readiness to respond. These seraphim are a great pattern to us of effective service.

The 4<sup>th</sup> element of this vision is the worship offered to God by these heavenly creatures (**3-4**). Worship, put simply is acknowledging God's worth – to take up His attributes and remember them before Him one by one. It's interesting that the attribute of God that most impressed these angelic beings was His holiness. If you stop any regular Joe on the street and ask him what's the most important attribute of God; he'll almost always say its "love." Of course, love is important; but it's not what most impresses those who see God face-to-face. Those who see God or have a striking revelation of God are always impressed with His holiness. It was the same for Isaiah (**5**). If this is the case, then holiness should obviously characterize the lives of God's people. We should be increasingly freed from the power of sin in our lives. But how is this possible? Paul explains the secret in **I Tim 3:16**.

This is not a technique, a method or a habit. The essential secret to godliness, to holy living, is Jesus Christ! Sin is the exact opposite of Christ-likeness; it's Christlessness. All attempts at self-improvement and moral reformation apart from Jesus are sin. It's only through knowing and relying on Him that we can even begin to live holy. This means that in the Christian life, more than anything else, it matters where we look, it matters what fills our vision. For whatever occupies our attention will steer and shape our every thought, motive and action. You are what you see! Life, righteousness, holiness and redemption are found in Jesus and are found only by those who look to Him.

And it's not that we take an occasional glance to see what Jesus is like and then go off and strain to make ourselves look like Him. No! The truth is, we become like Him through the very looking. The very sight of Him is a transforming thing. Today, as we look at Him by faith, we are being transformed into His likeness (**II Cor 3:18**). One day, when we see Him with our physical eyes, John tells us that "we will be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." (**I John 3:2**). The physical sight of the glorified Christ will be so magnificently effective it will transform our very bodies around us! Viewing Him now by the Spirit makes us more like Him spiritually; seeing Him face to face will finally make us – body and soul – just as He is: glorified! But we don't have to wait until that day to become like Him, we can and should start today by turning our eyes unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, and keeping them there.

Have you responded to the light you've been given? If not, the quote from Isaiah in **38** reveals what must happen. It contains 4 steps of a true conversion. 1<sup>st</sup>, you must see with your eyes: you must perceive the reality of divine things and have some knowledge of them. This is impossible apart from God's grace but maybe God is graciously dealing in you and you've come this far. If so, that's good. You start with that perception. 2<sup>nd</sup>, you must understand with your heart; meaning not only do you hear the truth and understand it but you must also receive it personally. 3<sup>rd</sup>, you must be converted: meaning that you must turn from sin to Christ, conversion is nothing more than an about-face or turning. It means leaving behind everything that exerts a contrary claim on your life to truly have and follow Jesus. Finally, you must be healed by God. It's God's final seal on your conversion and constitutes salvation.

God's healing involves justification, sanctification, and glorification; all of which God alone is responsible for accomplishing. God will heal you, save you; but only if you come to him in repentance and accept his gift of salvation. 😊