OLD TESTAMENT READING: ISAIAH 2:1-5

“The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” (Isaiah 2:1–5, ESV)

NEW TESTAMENT READING: JOHN 11:45-57

“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.’ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples. Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, ‘What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?’ Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.” (John 11:45–57, ESV)

INTRODUCTION

As we considered the story of the rising of Lazarus last week I made the point that this is one of those places in scripture where we are given a rare glimpse into the inner workings of a trial, or difficult circumstance. Typically we are not able to see how God is working in the trials of life. We are often left to speculate concerning God's purposes. But the story of the raising of Lazarus demonstrates that, though it is true that God is control of all things and is able to act, he does allow trials of various kinds to enter our lives for his glory and our good. But the story also demonstrates that Jesus truly loves those who belong to him, though he may allow a variety of trials for a time.
We saw that Jesus wept. All of this was demonstrated before our eyes as we considered the story of the rising of Lazarus last week.

Notice that something else is demonstrated in the passage that is before us today. Instead of a demonstration of the love that Christ has for his sheep, we have here a demonstration of the depth of man’s depravity. John 11:45-57 is a demonstration of just how blind and wicked the heart of man is apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

While it is certainly more enjoyable to set our eyes upon the image of Christ weeping for his friends, it is necessary that we also ponder this less pleasant thing. There are lessons to be learned here. Though it is true that we have believed upon Christ and are not like these who persist in stubborn unbelief, there is something to be learned from the sin of those who persisted in their unbelief. The sin that these men committed is the same sin that tempts us. May we learn to run from it!

Remember that Jesus raised a man from the grave who had been dead for four days. Tell me, if you had never heard this story before, what would you expect the result of this miracle to be? Would you not expect all who were present - all who were eye witness to this miracle - to believe in Jesus? How could anyone remain in a state of unbelief after witnessing a miracle of this magnitude? How could anyone reject such a magnificent sign? We would expect everyone who was there, and many more who would hear their testimony to believe!

And yet what do we read? Verse 45: “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.” (John 11:45–46, ESV)

**THE UNBELIEF OF THE JEWS DEMONSTRATES THE BLINDNESS OF MAN’S HEART TO THE THINGS OF GOD APART FROM THE REGENERATING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The first thing I want you to notice in this passage is how the unbelief of the Jews serves to demonstrate the blindness of man’s heart to the things of God apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

It is true that verse 45 starts by informing us that many of the Jews believed in Christ after witnessing the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. This is the result that we would expect - belief in Christ. The fact that many believed is not surprising to us. How could they not after seeing such a thing?

The surprising thing is that not all believed! We would expect that all who witnessed such a great miracle would walk away believing in Jesus. But the text only says “many”. And it also reveals something more surprising. Some of the eyewitnesses to this miracle actually took it upon themselves to go to the Pharisees to tell of all that Jesus had done.

Now please do not misunderstand their intentions. I suppose that you could read verse 46 thinking that these people went to the Pharisees because they were excited and proud of what Jesus had done.
done. It is possible to think that these went to the Pharisees as disciples of Christ - his evangelists and missionaries. But no. The ones who went to the Pharisees are contrasted with those who believed. They went to Pharisees in unbelief. They went in order to accuse Jesus. They went to tattle on him. Isn’t that something!

This all becomes clear as the story unfolds. For when the chief priests and the Pharisees hear about what Jesus had done they do not rejoice; they do not respond by repenting, or by falling to their knees in faith. No, they call a counsel and ask the question, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (John 11:47–48, ESV)

Notice that these are the chief priests and the Pharisees who are talking this way. These are the men who are supposed to lead the people to God, and yet here they are found conspiring against God, and seeking to hinder the people from seeing what is true. They come together; not in humble submission to the Word of God, but in order to oppose him.

I cannot help but see here a vivid demonstration of the blindness of man’s heart to the things of God. Jesus called a man back to life from four days in the grave. Many people saw it with their physical eyes, but only some perceived the significance of it with their spiritual eyes. Others were blind to it.

Does this episode not demonstrate what has already been revealed in John’s Gospel concerning what is needed in order for someone to believe in Jesus? Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:44, ESV)

“Jesus answered [Nicodemus], ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” (John 3:3, ESV)

We know that the Spirit of God must work if someone is to believe - John’s Gospel has made that clear. We know that God must call, or woo, or draw a sinner to himself if he is to believe. We know that Christ must heal our blindness - just as he physically healed the man who was blind from birth, so too much he provide a remedy to our spiritual blindness. We know these things because the Gospel of John has told us so. But I cannot think of a more potent and vivid demonstration of these truths than the text that is before us. If anything were to get the attention of natural man wouldn’t it be this? And yet so many persisted in their unbelief.

I’m reminded of the story that Jesus told about a rich man and man named Lazarus (not the same Lazarus as in this passage). This story is found in Luke 16 and goes something like this: Lazarus - a poor man died and wound to Abraham’s bosom. A rich man also died and was in torment in Hades - there is much to be said about this story but he point I am making is this - he made this request of Abraham, saying “‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’” (Luke 16:27–28, ESV) And what was Abraham’s response in this story? Luke 16:29:

“But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said
to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:29–31, ESV)

Such is the depth of our depravity! Such is our blindness apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit. Even if a man is raised, be it Lazarus of Bethany, or Jesus of Nazareth himself, the natural man will not believe.

I’m also reminded of what Paul had to say about man’s natural condition apart from the regenerating work of Christ. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:14, saying, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they [that is, the things of God] are spiritually discerned [judged, evaluated, understood.]” (1 Corinthians 2:14, ESV)

When Jesus rose Lazarus from the grave, the Spirit of God used that miracle to prepare some men and women for faith. The Spirit also used the miracle to confirm those who already believed in the faith - their faith was made stronger. But those with whom the Spirit was not at work, as surprising as it to us, remained in their unbelief, even though they saw this miracle with their own eyes. Their unbelief demonstrates the blindness of man’s heart to the things of God apart from the work of the Spirit.


The second thing that I want you to see in this text how the unbelief of the Jews demonstrates the self-centeredness of man’s heart apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

It has been said that sin at its essence is love turned inward. I think this can be easily demonstrated by looking at Genesis 3 and the account of the fall. Adam and Eve had all that they needed. They lived in paradise. They enjoyed perfection. The pinnacle of their paradise existence was their intimate and unbroken relationship with the God who made them. But when the serpent came he brought temptation with him. And what was the essence of the temptation except the suggestion that perhaps God was holding out on them? Perhaps there was more to be had than what God had provided. Perhaps life would be even better if they ate of the forbidden fruit. Perhaps they could elevate themselves even higher by casing off the restraints that God had laid upon them.

Adam and Eve fell because they began to love themselves more than they loved God. They should have loved God supremely, obeying his word forever. But they listened to the voice of the tempter instead, and they began to turn the love that was once so perfectly directed towards God, inward. Believing the lie, they began to love themselves. And being more concerned about themselves they began to act according to that world, satanic, counterfeit wisdom which. The end was destruction and death.

Notice that chief priests and Pharisees are possessed by the same spirit of self-love and the same desire for self-exultation.
They received word that Jesus had raised a man from the dead. And instead of believing, as you would expect, they began to reason amongst themselves. They called a counsel. They began to converse with one another (if we have learned anything from our past it is that bad things happen when humans get together to reason with one another, disregarding the Word of God).

And what is their concern? Verse 47: “So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’” (John 11:47–48, ESV)

That he preformed many signs, they could not deny. And the fact that those signs were genuine and true, leading many to believe, they had to admit. But if they allowed him to continue unchecked, “everyone would believe in him”, they said. Instead of believing in Christ they were more concerned that the Romans might get word of all of this and come and take away their place and their nation.

The Romans did not like movements like the one that was brewing around Jesus. Movements like this were viewed as a threat to national security. And so the Jews were right. If things got out of hand they might suffer at the hands of the Romans. It was possible that the temple be destroyed, and the nation overthrown. The leaders claim to be concerned with the wellbeing of the nation, but what do you think they were really concerned with? They were concerned about loosing their prestigious position. They were concerned that following Jesus would mean that they themselves be humbled. It is true that the Romans posed a threat, but that what all hypothetical. The real threat to them was Jesus himself. To believe in Jesus would require that these men bow before him. To believe in Jesus would require that they humbly submit to him. Faith in Christ would have demanded that these men, in one way or another, be humbled from their place of high standing.

This is what they were concerned about. And this, folks, was simply too much to ask. These powerful men were far too concerned with maintaining their prestigious position than to bother paying attention to insignificant things such as a man being raised to life after four days in the grave.

Self-centeredness, self-protection, self-love has a way of blinding us to the most obvious of things. Love is like a flashlight, it only illuminates our path when it is pointed outwards - first towards one true God, and then towards others. When love is turned inward it has the opposite effect. It blinds us to the truth instead of making it visible to us. Even obvious things become impossible to see.

And yet this is our natural condition. We are born into this world lovers of self. And so instead of saying, what is truth? I will do whatever it takes to live according to the truth. I’ll even even lay down my life! We say, how can get ahead? How can I be comfortable? How can I profit in the here and now? To heck with the truth so long as damage is not done to my little kingdom. This is the way of the natural, unregenerate man. The unbelief of the Jews in this story demonstrates the self-centeredness of man’s heart apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

The third thing that I would like you to see in this text is how the unbelief of the Jews demonstrates the callousness of man’s heart towards God apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

These men not only remained in their unbelief, they actually conspired to put Jesus to death. This is the depth of their depravity - this is how hard their hearts were. They respond to Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead with a death sentence - a death sentence for Jesus and, as we will see in chapter 12, a death sentence for Lazarus! His testimony was to strong.

Most astonishingly, it was the high priest himself who initiated the plan. Verse 49: “But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.’” (John 11:49–50, ESV)

Caiaphas was a skilled politician. He waited until the right time, he spoke boldly, he spoke persuasively, he spoke with clarity, giving the counsel direction. And what was his advice? It would be better to murder one innocent man than for the whole nation to suffer under Rome, should things get out of hand.

Remember, this was the high priest of Israel! This was the one who was to mediate between God and the people! This was the one who was to walk in purity and uprightness, teaching the people the ways of God. Instead he behaves like a tyrant.

Interestingly, John points out how the high priest’s words turned out to be prophetic. Of course Caiphas meant one thing with these words, but there was irony in them. His words would be fulfilled by Jesus in a way that Caiphas would never have expected. Jesus would indeed die for the nation! He would died for the sins of all his sheep from among the Jewish nation. And “not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.” Christ would die, not only for the sins of Jews, but also for the sins of gentiles. His sheep from both would be united into one body, one church, one family of God.

The point to be noticed is this: God was in control. He was in control even of Caiphas’ words, directing him in his moment of wickedness to speak prophetically concerning the will of God. Jesus would not be killed unwillingly. He came to lay down his life for the sheep. And not only for the sheep of the fold of Israel, but for the sheep of the fold of the gentiles as well.

Isn’t it astonishing, though, the way that God accomplishes his purposes even by and through men with unregenerate hearts? The purposes of God simply march on. He is not hindered in the least. His will is accomplished, not only by and through the righteous, but by and through the blind, self-centered, and calloused of this world. This is the God that we serve. He is Lord of all. Take comfort in that fact, Christian, as you live in this world.
CONCLUSION

So how does all of this apply?

Some might be thinking, what does all of this have to do with us? We are believing in Christ? We have confessed him as Lord! We are not like these unbelieving ones!

But that would assume that all who are here today are in fact believing in Christ. It may be that are some who have not believed in Christ. If that is you, I would say consider the works of Christ. Consider all that he did in his life as a demonstration of his power from on high. Consider this work - the raising of Lazarus - and the way that it serves as a precursor to the even greater work of his own death and resurrection. In these works Christ is demonstrating that he indeed has power over the grave. He has the power to give life eternal.

See the works, die to self, and give glory to God. Stop trying to hold on to your life as the unbelieving Jews did. For in holding on to it, you will loose it, whereas in letting it go, you will find it. Repent and believe upon Jesus who is the Christ, the Savior of the world. That is the application for the unbeliever.

But the passage is also applicable to the Christian. It is true that you are numbered among the many Jews who went away believing in Christ. But the sin of the unbelieving Jews serves to warn us of the propensity of the remaining corruptions within us.

Are we not still tempted, even in Christ, to turn a blind eye to the truths of God? Are we not tempted to neglect and doubt his word? Are we not tempted to go at it alone, relying upon our own human wisdom to deal with the demands of life? I know that you are tempted in this way. I have been tempted in this way.

But may it never be! May we forever live with eyes fixed upon the Word of God. May we forever give attention to the truth that God has revealed to us. May we look squarely upon it, receive it by faith, and live according to it all the days of our life. The Spirit of God has blessed us with the ability to see with spiritual clarity. He has cured our blindness so that we might see his face. How tragic and wasteful it is to squander the gift of spiritual sight by fixing our eyes upon the garbage of this world when we could gaze perpetually upon our Savior, the eternal Word of God. He has opened our eyes! Let us fix them upon him, the author and finisher of our faith.

And are we not also tempted to turn away from Christ, our bridegroom, the lover of our souls? We are tempted to turn back to old lovers. The most seductive of them all is named self. The desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, the pride of life - these are the things that keep many from ever turning to Christ. But they even call out to those who are in Christ, tempting the bride of Christ to turn back.

May it never be of us. May we never forget that the love of the world and the love of self leads only to death and destruction. May we never forget how good it is to know Christ and to walk in his ways. It is a satisfaction that never grows stale, but increases with the passing of time, and will increase on into eternity, as we walk with him. Die to self and live to Christ.
Brothers and sisters, if you have turned your eyes from Christ, and have directed your love towards other things, why are you surprised that your heart has grown calloused towards God and toward your neighbor? It is a love for God and his word which makes our heart soft towards his.

Let me close with this warning from Hebrews 3:12-14:

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. [Run to him today] . . . that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” (Hebrews 3:12–14, ESV)