

## 65 - Refusing to Believe

John 11:28-46

There are people who absolutely refuse to believe in Jesus Christ no matter what proof is presented. You can explain God's plan of salvation in crystal-clear terms, but they say it doesn't make sense to them. They might watch a miracle performed before their eyes, yet they won't repent. There are people who fearlessly acknowledge that the Bible warns them about what will happen to them if they die in their present condition, but still refuse to change. Why? What causes a person to refuse to believe? I'm sure there would be a different answer for each person we asked, but over the years the explanations I've heard or observed all seem to result from a particular decision that person made earlier in life.

Most of us, at some point in time, have struggled, or will struggle, with doubt. And there are many who become honestly confused by all the conflicting opinions about God. There are passionate voices that argue for God, and there are passionate voices that argue against Him. And I don't think any one of us escapes getting caught in those debates on occasion. But generally, as the years pass, most of us will come to the conclusion that the existence of God is, at least, possible, if not probable. Because in truth, it takes more faith to believe there is not a God than to believe there is one. So those who end up firmly rejecting God, do so for a reason, and that reason is often hidden from view. Somewhere in their past a deep, primal decision was made. They asked themselves a question and then answered it in a way that ended their investigation into the truth about the claims of Jesus Christ. And until that answer changes, no amount of evidence will make a difference. In fact they don't want more evidence, it only worries them.

As Jesus looked at the crowd standing around Him at Lazarus' funeral, His reaction was surprising. He became visibly angry and then He began to weep. What did He see that made Him do that? He saw people who refused to believe. Today let's try to understand what causes some individuals to refuse to believe, and then let's decide to do something about it.

At Lazarus' tomb (Jn 11:28-40)

• DBS (Wed-Sat)

Verses 41-42: Then some men stepped forward to lift the stone off the opening to the cave, and as they did John says Jesus "lifted up His eyes" and started speaking to the Father. Loud enough so that everyone could hear Him, He said, "Father, I thank You that You heard Me, and I know that You always hear Me, but because of the crowd standing around [Me] I said [this], so that they might believe that You sent Me" (literal). Before He performed this miracle He wanted everyone to understand that the power they were about to observe came from the Father; that He had been assigned to do what He was about to do, the Father had sent Him to that funeral; and He wanted people to understand that the Father always heard and answered His prayers. He said these things before He raised Lazarus from the dead because afterward everyone would be in such shock they wouldn't remember a word He said.

Verses 43-44: John selects a very special word to describe Jesus' shout. It's a word that usually describes the roaring sound that is heard when a multitude of people are shouting all at once (Jn 12:13; 18:40; 19:6, 12, 15; Ac 22:23). So Jesus didn't speak to the open tomb. He bellowed out a command, "Lazarus, Here! Out!" (literal) (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Eerdmans, 1971, p.561). No explanation is given for this loud command, but Jesus appears to be calling to someone who's in another world. And that person, in another dimension of existence, heard His voice and obediently returned to his body. We are watching the fulfillment of a promise. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (Jn 5:25).

As we watch Jesus raise Lazarus we need to remember that someday we too will hear that same voice call us into our resurrection bodies. John describes Lazarus' response this way: "The one who had died came out, feet and hands bound with bandages, and his face having been bound around with a cloth (the cloth probably went under his chin to keep his jaw from falling open) (A. Plummer, *St. John*, Cambridge, 1893, p.245). Then Jesus said, "Loose him, and let him go!" (literal).

The reaction (vs45-46)

That miracle was so stunning anyone with honest doubts was instantly convinced. John says many of the religious leaders who saw it believed in Jesus, but then we see a strange refusal to believe grip others. He adds, "But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus had done" (literal). In other words, they hurried back to Jerusalem so they could report the incident to the authorities. The difference between those two responses is confusing. One person believed; another wants Him arrested. Why? Before we attempt to answer that question, let's first try to understand the emotions Jesus felt that day.



# LIFE LESSONS

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### Anger and tears

Initially He expressed great anger, but then tears began to pour down His face. I don't think He was grieving over the death of His friend or even sympathizing with Mary who was sobbing at His feet. He knew what He was about to do. What infuriated Him and broke His heart was what He saw when He looked into the eyes of those standing behind her. He could see the determined hatred in some of them, and He knew exactly what that hatred would produce. It would spread to others and cause many to stumble in their faith. He could see into eternity and knew the misery those individuals would experience, but He also saw the horrible devastation that would come to Jerusalem and the entire nation in only a matter of decades (A.D. 66). Yes, He knew what He was about to do, but He knew it wouldn't be enough for some of them.

### Loving enemies

It's easier to understand Jesus' anger than it is His tears. The stubborn refusal to believe in Him by some must have been enormously frustrating, particularly because many of them were leaders who would damage their followers. Yet He walked toward the tomb weeping for those enemies, which shows that He separated in His mind the sin from the sinner. He hated their decision to reject Him but still loved the person who made it. That's what made His anger so righteous. He could see beyond how they were responding to Him, to what would happen to them if they didn't repent. In fact, those emotions reveal that He hadn't given up hope, that He still thought it was possible to win their hearts. And He wasn't wrong. Listen to a report John gives about what took place only a few weeks later.

“A large crowd of Jews (religious leaders, ultra-orthodox, priests, etc.) then learned that He was there (in Jerusalem for Passover); they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews (religious leaders, ultra-orthodox, priests, etc.) were going away and were believing in Jesus” (Jn 12:9-11).

### Hidden reasons

As we said earlier, there are people who absolutely refuse to believe in Jesus Christ, no matter what proof is presented. And we said the reason is often hidden from view. At some point in the past that person asked a question and then answered it in a way that ended their investigation. Let's listen to some of the most common questions and then listen to answers Jesus gave, not so we can criticize those who answered wrongly, but so we know how to help. Jesus' example at Lazarus' funeral challenges us. He never gave up. He showed us that even the most resistant person may still have a change in heart. Here are six possible questions that may have become an obstacle to those who refuse to believe:

- Question #1: Who will reject me if I follow Jesus? Can I bear to be ridiculed or abandoned by those I love or need?

Matthew 5:11-12, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great.”

- Question #2: What must I give up to possess eternal life? What will I lose if I choose to follow Him?

Mark 8:35-36, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever wishes to lose his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul.”

- Question #3: What have I done that God can't forgive?

Luke 22:20, “He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.”

Jeremiah 31:31, “They shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them' declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more.”

- Question #4: What have I done that I can't forgive?

John 3:14-15, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”

- Question #5: What has God done that I refuse to forgive?

John 14:9, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.”

- Question #6: What has someone done to me that I refuse to forgive?

Matthew 6:14-15, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”



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## How can we help?

No one can change another person's will; not even God will do that, but there are ways we can help someone who has been caught in the grip of a fearful, angry, shameful or selfish decision. Seldom have those decisions been made with full understanding. Often they were made because the enemy deceived that person. Here are a few guidelines to empower us to help release those who refuse to believe and remain patient while we wait: 1) spiritual warfare ("bind the strongman"); 2) prophetic living (unreasonable kindness), undeserved forgiveness, the joy of knowing Christ); 3) decide to watch for a lifetime, and 4) God's guidance (word of knowledge, wisdom, etc.). Meanwhile we need to remember a promise Jesus spoke after someone refused to believe. He said,

"It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle". When the disciples heard this they were very astonished and said, "Then who can be saved?" And looking at them Jesus said to them, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Mt 19:23-26)

## Questions

- 1) Have there been seasons in your life when you struggled with doubt? What caused it? How did God restore your faith?
- 2) Do you know someone who struggles with one of these six questions (listed above)? Which one? Has God shown you how you can help that person?