

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
12:34-43

34. The people answered him, We have heard from the law that Christ abides forever; and how *can* you say, The Son of man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of man? 35. Then Jesus said to them, Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you; for he who walks in darkness does not know where he goes. 36. While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light. These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and hid himself from them. 37. But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they did not believe in him, 38. that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 39. Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again, 40. He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, that they should not see with *their* eyes nor understand with *their* heart, and be converted, and I should heal them. 41. These things Isaiah said when he saw his glory and spoke of him. 42. Nevertheless even among the chief rulers many believed in him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; 43. for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

34.--[*The people answered, etc.*] This verse supplies a remarkable instance of the perverse and hardened blindness of the Jews in our Lord's time. They pretended to be unable to reconcile the Lord's language about being "lifted up" with the Old Testament prophecies about the eternity and never dying of Christ. That "lifted up" meant being put to death on the cross, they seem to have understood. That our Lord, or the Son of man, as He called Himself, claimed to be the Christ, they quite understood. What they stumbled at was the idea of the eternal Christ being put to death. They had got hold of the idea of a glorious, eternal Messiah. They had not got hold of the idea of a suffering, dying Messiah.

Of course they were right in holding that "Christ abides forever." It is the universal doctrine of the Old Testament. (Compare Isa. 9:7, Psalm 110:4, Ezek. 37:25, Dan. 7:14, Micah 4:7.) Our Lord had never for a moment denied this. He was the promised Savior who, as Gabriel said to Mary, was to "reign over the house of Jacob forever" (Luke 1:33).

On the other hand, they were entirely wrong in not understanding that Christ had to suffer before He reigned, and to go to the cross before He wore the crown. They were wrong in not seeing that His sacrifice as our Substitute and our Passover was the very cornerstone of revealed religion, and that the very "law" of which they made so much pointed to His sacrifice as clearly as to His eternal glory. They forgot that Isaiah says that Messiah is to be "brought as a lamb to the slaughter," and that Daniel speaks of His being "cut off." (Isa. 53:7, Dan. 9:26.)

The words "we" and "you" in this verse, in the Greek are emphatic. WE Jews have always been taught to believe the eternity of Messiah. "YOU, on the other hand, say that Messiah must be put to death and lifted up on the cross. How is this? How are we to understand it?"

"The law" in this verse must evidently be taken for the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures.

It is worthy of remark that the Jews charge our Lord with saying "the Son of Man must be lifted up." Yet our Lord in the last verse but one had not mentioned the Son of man but had only said, "I, if I be lifted up." It is also singular that our Lord nowhere uses the expression "lifted up" except in His conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:14. We must therefore either suppose that the Jews referred to the saying of Christ when He spoke to Nicodemus (which is very unlikely), or else that the expression "The Son of man must be lifted up" was so frequently on our Lord's lips that the Jews caught it up and pressed it on Him here, or else that our Lord so frequently spoke of Himself as the Son of man that when He said "If I be lifted up" the Jews thought it equivalent to saying "If the Son of man be lifted up."

The question, "Who is this Son of man?" can hardly imply that the Jews did not know that Christ was speaking of Himself. Does it not rather mean, "Who, and what kind of a person do You claim to be, calling Yourself the Son of man and yet talking of being lifted up on the cross? Do You really mean that one and the same person can be a dying person and yet also the eternal Christ? Do You claim to be the eternal Christ and yet talk of being lifted up on a cross? Explain this apparent contradiction, for we cannot understand it." It is just the old story over again. The Jews could not and would not understand that Messiah was to suffer as well as to reign, to die as a Sacrifice as well as to appear in glory. They could not and would not see that the two things could be reconciled and could meet in one person. Hence their perplexity exhibited in the question of the text.

The title "Son of man" is first found applied to Messiah in Daniel 7:13. We cannot doubt that the Jews understood and remembered that passage.

Let us note that a half knowledge of Scripture, a suppression of some texts, and a misapplication of other texts will account for a large portion of mistakes in religion. In this way people get a heresy or a crotchet into their heads on some doctrinal point and seem blind to the truth. No heresies are so obstinately defended and so difficult to meet as those which are based on a perverted view of some portion of Scripture. In reading our Bibles, we must be careful to give every part and portion its due weight.

Let us remember, before we judge the blindness of the Jews too severely in this place, that many Christians are just as slow to see the whole truth about the second advent of Christ and His coming glory as the Jews were to see the whole truth about the first advent and the cross. Multitudes apply texts to the first advent which only belong to the second advent and are just as much prejudiced against the second personal coming of Christ to reign as the Jews were against the first personal advent to suffer. Not a

few Christians, I fear, are ready to say, "We have heard out of the Scriptures that Christ was to come in humiliation to be crucified; and how say ye, then, that Christ must come in power to reign?"

The expression "this" is rather emphatic and has something contemptuous about it. "We have heard of a Son of man who is eternal. Who is THIS Son of man about to be lifted up on the cross of whom you speak?"

35.--[*Then Jesus said...light with you.*] It is noteworthy that our Lord makes no direct answer to the question of the Jews. He only warns them, in a very solemn manner, of the danger they were in of letting their day of grace slip away unimproved. He draws a figure from the light of day and the acknowledged importance of walking and journeying while we have the light. By "the light" He evidently means Himself. "I, the Light of the world, am only going to be with you a very little longer. My day is drawing to a close. The sun will soon set." (Compare Jer. 13:16.)

Here, as elsewhere, we see how clearly and distinctly our Lord saw His own approaching death and withdrawal from the world.

Ecolampadius thinks that there is a latent connection between this verse and the question of the Jews. "You ask who is this Son of man? I reply that He is the Light of the world, as I have often told you. Like the sun, He is about to be eclipsed, or withdrawn from your eyes very shortly. Make haste and delay not to believe on Him."

Gerhard justly remarks on this sentence how far from infallibility the best of the Fathers were. Even Augustine, from his slight acquaintance with Greek, renders the sense, "There is yet a *little light* in your *hearts!*"

A German commentator remarks that Christ seems here to rebuke this quibbling and questioning about phrases. "There was no time now for sophistry and circumlocution. It was a solemn matter. How differently ought they to demean themselves in their little residue of time, and not to fritter it away with affected contradictions! How earnestly they ought to seek at once for refuge to the light, and shield themselves against coming darkness!"

[*Walk while ye have the light.*] This solemn exhortation was meant to urge the Jews to do for their souls' safety what a wise traveler would do to get safely to his journey's end. "Enter in at the strait gate; walk in the narrow way; flee from the city of destruction; set out on your journey towards eternal life, rise and be moving while I and my Gospel are close to you, shining on you, and within your reach."

Hengstenberg remarks that "walking here denotes activity and stands opposed to an idle and indifferent rest."

[*Lest darkness come upon you.*] Our Lord here warns the Jews of the things to be feared if they neglected His advice. Darkness would overtake, catch, and come upon them. He would leave the world and return to His Father. They would be left in a state of judicial darkness and blindness as a nation and, with the exception of an election, would be given over to

untold calamities, scattering, and misery. How true these words were we know from the history of the Jews, written by Josephus, after our Lord left the world. His account of the extraordinary state of the inhabitants of Jerusalem during the siege of the city by Titus is the best commentary on the text before us. The state of the Jews, as a nation, during the last days of Jerusalem can only be described as "darkness that might be felt."

[*For he...does not know...goes.*] This is an argument drawn from the acknowledged helplessness of one who attempts a difficult journey in a dark night. He cannot see his way. He only gets into trouble and perhaps loses his life. This was exactly the case of the Jewish nation after our Lord left the world. Up to the time of the destruction of the temple, they seemed like a nation of madmen and a people judicially blinded--conscious that they were in a wrong position, struggling furiously to get out of it, and yet only plunging deeper into the mire of hopeless misery till Titus took the city and carried the whole race into captivity. They had put out their own eyes by rejecting Christ and were like a strong man blinded, maddened by a sense of his own misery and yet impotent to get out of it.

36.--[*While ye have light...children of light.*] This sentence would have been more accurately rendered, "While ye have THE Light;" that is, "while ye have ME, the Light of the world, with you." It is a final, affectionate entreaty to the Jews repeating in more plain words the exhortation of the last verse, "To walk in the light." It is as though our Lord said, "Once more I beseech you to believe in Me as the Light of the world, while I am with you." The end and object for which they are to believe is also added: "That ye may become my children, have light in your hearts, light in your consciences, light in your lives, light on your present path, light in your future prospects." There can be no doubt that the expression "children of light" is a Hebraism signifying "to be brought in close connection with or under the full influence of light."

Let us note that here, as elsewhere, believing is the first step, the one thing needful. The exhortation is still to be offered to every sinner directly and personally--"Believe, that you may be a child of light."

[*These things...hid himself from them.*] We know not exactly on what day in the last week of our Lord's life the words just recorded had been spoken. The sentence before us certainly seems to mark a break and interval, and we can hardly suppose that the short address from the forty-fourth verse to the end of the chapter was spoken the same day or was continuously connected with the discourse ending in this verse.

To me it seems probable that our Lord "departed" to Bethany after the miracle of the Voice from the heavens and the commotion that followed it. The words of our English version "did hide Himself," seem to me rather stronger than the Greek warrants. It would be more literally, "was concealed from them." Whether this was by miracle, as on other occasions, is not clear.

Calvin seems to think that our Lord only departed from the hearers immediately round Him and went to the temple where He met with another audience of a more believing kind. Flacius, too, thinks it was only a

short and temporary withdrawal. Poole, on the contrary, takes the view that I adopt and says that our Lord withdrew to Bethany.

37.--[*But though...miracles...them.*] This verse begins a long parenthetical comment, which John was inspired to make at this point, on the peculiar unbelief of the Jerusalem Jews. He remarks on the singular hardness of this section of the nation in the face of the singularly strong evidence which they enjoyed of Christ's Messiahship.

The expression "so many miracles" seems to point out that the miracles recorded by St. John are by no means all the miracles that our Lord performed in and near Jerusalem. Beside the purifying of the temple, John only records three: the healing of the impotent man, the healing of the blind, and the raising of Lazarus (John 5, 9, 11). Yet John expressly speaks of *miracles* (both here and in John 2:23), and the Pharisees say, "This Man does many miracles" (John 11:47).

The Greek word rendered "before" is very strong. It is the same that is "in the sight of" in 1 Thes. 1:3 and "in the presence of" in 1 Thes. 2:19.

[*Yet they did not believe in him.*] In estimating the peculiar hardness and unbelief of the Jews at Jerusalem, it is worth remembering that all experience proves that where there is the greatest quantity of the form of religion, there is often the greatest proportion of formality and unbelief. The places where men become most familiar with the outside and ceremonial of Christianity are precisely the places where the heart seems to become most hard. Witness the state of Rome at this day. Witness too often the state of cathedral cities in our own land. We need not wonder that the city in which was the temple, the daily sacrifice, and the priesthood was the most unbelieving place in Palestine.

38.--[*That the word of Isaiah...spoke.*] We must not suppose this means that the Jews did not believe *in order that* the prophecy of Isaiah might be fulfilled. This would be teaching sheer fatalism and would destroy man's responsibility. The true meaning is, "So that by this unbelief the saying of Isaiah was fulfilled." (See John 5:20, Rom. 5:20, 2 Cor. 1:17.)

Chrysostom observes: "It was not because Isaiah spoke that they believed not, but because they were not about to believe, that he spoke."

Augustine says: "The Lord, by the prophet, did predict the unbelief of the Jews--predict, however, not cause. It does not follow that the Lord compels any man to sin because He knows men's future sins."

Theophylact and Euthymius say much the same..

[*Lord, who has believed our report?*] This question begins the well-known 53rd chapter of Isaiah, which describes with such extraordinary accuracy our Lord's sufferings. It is certainly a most singular fact that the very chapter which the Jews in every age have been most obstinately unwilling to believe should begin with this question. It is a Hebraism, tantamount to saying, "Nobody believes our report." The unbelief of the Jews was a thing as clearly foretold in Scripture as the sufferings of Christ. If they had

not been unbelieving, the Scriptures would have been untrue.

[*To whom...revealed?*] The expression "arm of the Lord" is thought by Augustine to mean Christ Himself. It may be so. If not, it must mean, "To whom is the Lord's power in raising up a Redeemer and an atoning sacrifice revealed?" That is, the Lord's power is revealed to and received by none. The question here again is a Hebraism, equivalent to an assertion.

Bullinger observes that "some might perhaps wonder that the Jews did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah. To this John replies that Isaiah long ago foretold that they would prove an unreasonable and unbelieving nation."

The quotation of Isaiah in this place is strong evidence that the 53rd chapter of this prophecy applies to Christ and none else.

39.--[*Therefore they could not believe, etc.*] This is undeniably a difficult verse. It cannot of course mean that the Jews were unable to believe, although really desirous to do so, and were prevented by the prophecy of Isaiah. What, then, can it mean? The following paraphrase is offered: "This was the cause why they could not believe--they were in that state of judicial blindness and hardness which Isaiah had described. They were justly given over to this state because of their many sins, and for this cause they had no power to believe."

"Therefore" is literally "on account of this." It cannot, I think, look backward, but forward. (Compare 10:17 and 12:18.)

"They could not" is literally "they were not able." It precisely describes the moral inability of a thoroughly hardened and wicked man to believe. He is thoroughly under the mastery of a hardened and seared conscience and has, as it were, lost the power of believing. They had no will to believe and so they had no power. They could have believed if they would, but they would not and so they could not. The expression is parallel to the well-known words, "No man can come to Me, except the Father who has sent Me draws him." There the meaning is, "No man has any will to come unless he is drawn, and so no man can come."

Even in our own English language the expression "could not" is sometimes used in the sense of "would not." Thus the brethren of Joseph "hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him" (Gen. 37:4).

The word "because" is a needlessly strong rendering of the Greek. It would be just as correctly translated "for."

Chrysostom observes: "In many places Christ is wont to term choice power. So, 'The world *cannot* hate you, but Me it hates.' So in common conversation a man says, 'I cannot love this or that person, calling the force of his will power.'"

Augustine says: "If I be asked why they could not believe, I answer in a word, Because they would not." He also says, "It is said of the Omnipotent, He *cannot* deny Himself, and this is the power of the Divine will. So 'they could not believe' is the fault of the human will."

Zwingle also says that "could not" means "would not."

Ecolampadius observes: "They would not, and therefore they could not believe. God is wont to punish those who commit some sin by giving them up to other sins." This, he remarks, is the heaviest judgment to which we can be given up--to have sins punished by sins, that is, by being let alone to commit them.

Bishop Hall says: "They could not believe, because, as Isaiah says, in a just punishment for their maliciousness and contempt, God had stricken them with a reprobate sense, so that their eyes were blinded."

Quesnel says here: "Let us bewail this inability of will with which, by means of Adam's sin, we are all born, and which, by our own sins, we daily increase. Let us continually have recourse to Him who said, 'without Me ye can do nothing,' and, 'No man can come to Me, unless the Father draw him.'"

40.--[*He has blinded their eyes, etc.*] This quotation is a free paraphrase of the general view of a verse in Isaiah 6:9,10. I think it can only have one meaning. That meaning is, that "God had given over the Jews to judicial blindness as a punishment for their long-continued and obstinate rejection of His warnings." That God does in some cases give people over as a punishment for obstinate unbelief, and that He may be justly termed the cause of such unbelief, is, I think, quite plain in Scripture. Pharaoh is a case in point. He obstinately refused God's warnings and so at last He was given over, and God is said to have "hardened his heart." Compare Joshua 11:20: "It was of the Lord to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, that He might destroy them." (So Deut. 2:30, 1 Sam. 2:25, Rom. 9:18.)

This is no doubt a very solemn and awful subject. It seems at first sight to make God the author of man's destruction. But surely a moment's reflection will show us that God is a Sovereign in punishing, and may punish in any way he pleases. Some He cuts off suddenly the moment they sin. Others He gives over to judicial blindness and ceases to strive with their consciences. "The Judge of all the earth will certainly do right." Those whom He is said to "harden and blind" will always be found to be persons whom He had previously warned, exhorted, and constantly summoned to repent. And never is He said to harden and blind, and give men up to judicial hardness and blindness, till after a long course of warnings. This was certainly the case with Pharaoh and with the Jews.

The consequence of God blinding and hardening a person is that he does not "see" his danger with his eyes or "understand" his position with his heart. The result is that he holds on his way unconverted, and dies without his soul's disease being healed. "Seeing" and "understanding" are essential parts of conversion. No simpler reason can be given why myriads of church-goers continue careless, unaffected, unmoved, and unconverted: they neither "see" nor "understand." God alone can give them seeing eyes and understanding hearts, and ministers cannot. And one solemn reason why many live and die in this state is that they have resisted God's warnings, and are justly punished already with a judicial blindness and hardness by Him whom they have resisted.

The key to the whole difficulty, after all, lies in the answer we are prepared to give to the question, "Is God just in punishing the sinner?" The true Christian and honest Bible reader will find no difficulty in answering that question in the affirmative. Once grant that God is just in punishing the ungodly, and there is an end of the problem. God may punish by giving over the obstinate sinner to a reprobate mind, as really as by sentencing him to everlasting fire at the last day.

One thing only must never be forgotten. God "wills not the death of any sinner." He is willing to soften the hardest heart and to open the blind eyes of the greatest sinner. In dealing with men about their souls, we must never forget this. We may well remind them that by hardened impenitence they may provoke God to give them up. But we must also press on them that God's mercies in Christ are infinite, and that, if they are finally lost, they will have none but themselves to blame.

Burgon thinks that the nominative to "blinded" at the beginning of the verse is not God but "the Jewish people," and that the meaning is, "This people has blinded their own eyes." But I cannot see that this idea can be supported by reference to Isaiah, and though it smooths over difficulties, I dare not receive it.

Calvin thinks that the passage applies to the hardness by which God punishes the wickedness of an ungrateful people. They are given over justly to an unbelieving and judicially blinded state of mind.

Poole observes: "We have this text, than which there is none more terrible, no less than six times quoted in the New Testament. In all places it is quoted and given as a reason for the Jews' unbelief in Christ. (Matt. 13:14,15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; Acts 28:26,27; Rom. 11:8). It is not quoted alike in all places, but for substance it is the same. In the original, Isaiah is made the instrumental cause. Matthew and Luke, in Acts, mention the people themselves as the cause. All the other texts speak of it as God's act. The thing is easily reconciled." He then says: "The Jews first shut their own eyes and hardened their own hearts. Thus behaving themselves, God judicially gave them up to their own lusts, permitted their hearts to harden, and suffered them to close their own eyes so that they could not repent, believe, or return. God did not infuse any malice into their hearts, but withdrew His grace from them."

Rollock makes the wise and deep remark that "Darkness does not blind men so much as light, unless God renews their minds by His Spirit."

It is of course noteworthy that this quotation is not given literally and exactly as it stands in the Old Testament. But it is particularly mentioned by Surenhusine in his book upon the quotations in the New Testament, that it was a common thing with the Hebrew doctors to abbreviate texts in quoting them, and to be content with giving the general sense. The abbreviation, therefore, in the text quoted before us would not strike John's contemporaries as at all extraordinary.

Let us not fail to remark how "seeing, understanding, being converted, and being healed" are linked together.

41.--[*These things Isaiah said...spoke of him.*] To see the full force of this verse, we should read the sixth chapter of Isaiah in its entirety. We should there see a magnificent description of the Lord's glory, before which even the seraphim veiled their faces. We should observe their cry, "Holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts!" We should mark how Isaiah says, "My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." And then let us remember that John says, "Isaiah saw Christ's glory and spoke of Christ!" How anyone in the face of this evidence can say that Jesus Christ is not very God, it seems hard to understand.

Lightfoot thinks that Isaiah in this chapter had a view of the glory which our Lord would have when He came to punish the Jewish nation. He thinks this is pointed out by "the posts of the door being shaken;" by "the temple being filled with smoke;" and by "the cities being wasted." (See Isaiah 6.)

42.--[*Nevertheless...many believed in him.*] Here St. John mentions a fact which he would have us take together with his account of the hardened unbelief of most of the Jews. There were some who were not so utterly hardened as the rest. They were in a different state of mind--not blind but convinced, not hardened against our Lord but secretly persuaded that He was the Christ. Many even of the chief people at Jerusalem believed, in their own secret minds, that Jesus was the Christ. This faith no doubt was only the faith of the head and not of the heart. But they did believe.

Let us note that there is often far more going on in people's minds than preachers are aware of. There is much secret conviction.

[*But because...did not confess him.*] They dared not openly confess their faith in our Lord for fear of the persecution of the Pharisees. They were cowards, and influenced by the fear of man. No wonder that our Lord spoke so strongly in other places about the duty of confessing Him.

[*Lest...out of the synagogue.*] The thing that they feared was excommunication. We can have little idea perhaps of the extreme dread with which a Jew regarded exclusion from the visible Jewish Church. Unlike ourselves, he knew no other Church in the whole world. To be shut out of this Church was equivalent to being shut out of heaven. The dread of excommunication in the Irish Catholic Church is perhaps the nearest thing to it in our days.

43.--[*For they loved, etc.*] St. John here tells us plainly the prevailing motive in the minds of the cowardly Jews. They loved above everything to be well thought of by their fellowmen. They thought more of having the good opinion of man than the praise of God. They could not bear the idea of being laughed at, ridiculed, reviled, or persecuted by their fellowmen. To keep in with them and have their praise, they sacrificed their own convictions and acted contrary to their conscience. How much this feeling injures the soul is shown by our Lord's words in a former place: "How can ye believe which received honor one from another?" (John 5:44.)

Let us remember that all over the world the same miserable motive is still ruining myriads of souls. "The fear of man brings a snare" (Prov. 29:25).

Nothing seems so difficult to overcome as the desire of pleasing man, keeping in with man, and retaining man's praise. Nothing will overcome it but thorough faith. "This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). The expulsive power of a new principle that makes us see God, Christ, heaven, hell, judgment, and eternity as realities, is the grand secret of getting the victory over the fear of man.

Poole says: "They were not willing to part with their great places in the magistracy, which brought them respect honor, and applause from men. They valued this more than God's praise."