

John 8:43

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word.

Analysis

Why do ye not understand my speech?—The question τί τὴν λαλιὰν τὴν ἐμὴν οὐ γινώσκετε (ti tēn lalian tēn emēn ou ginōskete) expresses both genuine inquiry and rhetorical condemnation. The noun λαλιά (lalia) means 'manner of speech,' 'utterance,' 'what is said'—focusing on the communication itself, not just its content. The verb γινώσκω (ginōskō) means to know, perceive, understand. Jesus asks why they can't comprehend His basic communication—the words He's speaking are clear, yet they're utterly failing to grasp them.

Even because ye cannot hear my word—The conjunction ὅτι (hoti, 'because') introduces the devastating explanation. The verb 'cannot' (οὐ δύνασθε/ou dynasthe) indicates absolute inability, not merely difficulty. The infinitive 'hear' (ἀκούειν/akouein) means more than physical hearing—it's receptive listening, obedient response. The noun λόγον (logon, 'word') differs from λαλιά (lalia) in verse's first half: λόγος indicates content, meaning, substance; λαλιά indicates delivery, speech-act. They can't understand His speech because they're unable to hear His word—the problem isn't Jesus's clarity but their spiritual deafness.

This verse diagnoses the root of unbelief: not intellectual deficiency but moral and spiritual inability. Jesus has spoken clearly throughout this discourse—His claims to deity (vv.12, 24, 28, 58), His mission from the Father (vv.26, 29, 38, 42), His offer of freedom through truth (vv.31-32, 36). The problem isn't that He's been obscure but that they're incapable of receiving His word. This echoes Jesus's earlier teaching: 'He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them

not, because ye are not of God' (John 8:47, coming just four verses later). Spiritual hearing requires spiritual life; the spiritually dead cannot perceive spiritual truth (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The distinction between *λαλιά* (speech/utterance) and *λόγος* (word/content) is subtle but significant. They might hear the sounds He's making, parse the Greek grammar, follow the logical structure—yet completely miss the meaning because they lack capacity to receive divine revelation. This is the scandal of particular grace: God enables some to hear while leaving others in their self-chosen deafness.

Historical Context

Jesus's lament echoes prophetic denunciations of Israel's historical deafness to God's word. Isaiah 6:9-10, which Jesus quotes in Matthew 13:14-15, describes judicial hardening: 'Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive.' Jeremiah 6:10 complains, 'To whom shall I speak, and give warning, that they may hear? behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, the word of the LORD is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it.' Ezekiel 12:2: 'Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house.'

This wasn't new problem but persistent pattern throughout Israel's history. Despite miraculous deliverances (Red Sea, manna, Jordan crossing), despite prophetic warnings (Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah), despite exile's discipline (Babylon, 70 years), Israel repeatedly failed to hear God's word with obedient faith. The tragedy intensified in Jesus's day: the eternal Word made flesh (John 1:14) stood before them speaking divine truth, yet they couldn't hear. The Light shone in darkness, but darkness couldn't comprehend it (John 1:5).

First-century rabbinic Judaism prided itself on Torah study, Scriptural interpretation, doctrinal precision. Pharisees memorized vast portions of Scripture, debated minute legal details, preserved oral traditions. Yet all this religious activity didn't produce spiritual hearing. Knowledge of Scripture isn't the same as hearing God's word—the Pharisees knew texts but missed the Text's

Author standing before them. This demonstrates that unregenerate humanity can study, memorize, and discuss Scripture without truly hearing God speak. Spiritual deafness afflicts religious scholars as much as irreligious pagans; only divine grace opens ears to hear (Acts 16:14: 'the Lord opened [Lydia's] heart').

Church history repeats this pattern. Medieval scholastics debated transubstantiation while missing justification by faith. Liberal theologians analyzed biblical criticism while denying biblical authority. Contemporary professors teach Scripture as literature while remaining deaf to its divine voice. Meanwhile, fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and children hear and believe—'thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes' (Matthew 11:25).

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between hearing the sounds of Scripture and truly 'hearing' God's word with spiritual understanding and obedience?
2. How does this verse demonstrate that the problem in unbelief is moral/spiritual, not intellectual or evidential?
3. Why can religious people who study Scripture extensively still be 'unable to hear' God's word?

Interlinear Text

διατί τὴν λαλιὰν τὴν ἐμόν. οὐ γινώσκετε; ὅτι
Why speech my not do ye even because
G1302 G2981 G3588 G1699 G3756 G1097 G3754

οὐ δύνασθε ἀκούειν τὸν λόγον τὸν ἐμόν.
not hear word my
G3756 G1410 G3588 G3056 G1699

Additional Cross-References

John 5:43 (Parallel theme): I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.

John 7:17 (Parallel theme): If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.

Acts 7:51 (Parallel theme): Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

Proverbs 28:5 (Parallel theme): Evil men understand not judgment: but they that seek the LORD understand all things.

Jeremiah 6:10 (Word): To whom shall I speak, and give warning, that they may hear? behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, the word of the LORD is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it.

John 8:27 (Parallel theme): They understood not that he spake to them of the Father.

John 6:60 (Parallel theme): Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?

Isaiah 44:18 (Parallel theme): They have not known nor understood: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand.

Isaiah 6:9 (Parallel theme): And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.

Hosea 14:9 (Parallel theme): Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? for the ways of the LORD are right, and the just shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein.

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