

Before Abraham Was, I Am John 8:48-59

When I was in grade school we used to play a game at recess (which didn't have a very politically correct name, and I'm sure teachers won't accept today – for good reason) called “Kill the man with the ball!” The rules were really simple: Get a ball. Give it to a man (that is a boy/girl, usually a boy). Everyone, go crush the person with the ball. Man with the ball; don't be stupid. Run. Or get rid of the ball.

The book of John continues to show us the escalating hostility to Jesus Christ – conflicts that will eventually lead to his death.

The Feast of Tabernacles has been filled with hostility (7:1, “some were seeking to kill him”).

They are playing the game of “kill the man with the bold claims.”

- Jesus wasn't a bully, but he has demonstrated remarkable boldness. (He fulfills this ministry in the fellowship with His Father, for His Father's glory).
- Some receive him; others reject him.
- His massive claims shocked and enraged people.
- They haven't killed him yet, because they're not in charge of his death; He is.

At the Feast of Tabernacles, we've read of two astonishing claims (7:37-38, 8:12), along with several others.

The response to the bold claims?

Escalating conflict:

Stage 1: Contradiction (8:13)

Stage 2: Cynicism (8:19, 41)

Stage 3: Denial (8:33)

Stage 4: Insult (8:48)

Stage 5: Sarcasm (8:53)

Stage 6: Violence (8:59)

The Son of God has come into the world for the primary purpose of saving it, but the world wants to respond in similar fashion!

Why? Because **darkness hates the light**.

The darkness wants to kill the light.

Darkness

The Pharisees and the religious leaders represent the darkness that is in this world.

- In many ways, what we're reading is still a continuation of 8:12a.
- In many ways, the light keeps getting brighter with claim after claim being made (culminating in this massive claim, “Before Abraham Was, I am”); and the darkness is getting deeper and deeper, culminating an attempt to stone Jesus.

The Pharisees aren't the only ones in the dark.

- It's everyone **who is not following the light. (8:12b)**

The **darkness of unbelief** comes in various forms – it can be found self-righteous religion, or self-centered secularism (that's present everywhere in our western world).

Darkness of unbelief is displayed in:

- A Failure to listen
- Not embracing the truth (8:45-46)
- Irrationality (“You have a devil”)
- Ignorance of true spiritual things (46)

Ever since the initial rebellion (Isa 14:12-14), Satan has been waging war against God and his servants.

- In darkness, he tempted our first parents who were dwelling in the light of paradise
- In darkness, Pharaoh (with the serpent head piece), opposed Moses.
- In darkness, the prophets of Baal (promoted by Ahab and Jezabel) opposed Elijah, the prophet of light.
- In darkness, the Sanhedrin opposed Stephen, and stoned him to death.
- In darkness, the Pharisees (whom Jesus says “are sons of the devil”) oppose him.

Now, victory is an absolute certainty for the believer, because Jesus has already triumphed at the cross, and resurrection.

- But the battle wages on.
- The devil knows his days of having any influence are limited, in light of the soon coming Christ. Now Satan rages violently against God's people. (12:12)
- And he often does what we see here – **Causing people to doubt the claims of Christ, causing them to deny the claims of Christ, to not truly listen to the claims of Christ, and to not be interested in them.**

To summarize his claims here, we may say this:

**The preeminent and pre-existent Son of God
promises eternal life to all who follow him!**

So let's break it down into three parts (or three lights shining in the darkness)

- (1) The Promise of Jesus (48-52)
- (2) The Preeminence of Jesus (53-56)
- (3) The Pre-Existence of Jesus (57-58)

#1: The Promise of Jesus (8:48-52)

48: So far the Jews have not been able to successfully dispute the claims of Jesus, so now they **attack him personally.**

- They religious leaders just don't stop – they're peristent!
- We could give them a slogan, "We're wrong but were strong."

"A Samaritan?" Where does this come from?

- It's a slur, an insult. "You are no better than a Samaritan!
- It may also have to do with Jesus' laxity in the observance of certain Jewish practices.

"You have a demon"

- Frequently, people charge him with having a demon (7:20; 8:52; 10:20).
- **They're telling God in flesh that He's demon possessed.**
- That's ridiculous.

49: Jesus ignores the Samaritan part, and quickly denies the demon part.

- **The world still says horrible things about Jesus and Christianity.**
- Then he adds a comeback: **Far from having a demon, his commitment is honoring the Father. (Jn 17)**

50: Jesus also rejects self-seeking glory.

- He cares about the Father's glory... (John 17:3)
- **When God's glory is more important than your own, there's great freedom there.**
- **Jesus doesn't go off on these guys, "You idiots..."**
- They have attacked him, and he says, I'll do what's right, and glorify the Father.
- Then he adds, "He is the judge."
- **The opponents thought they were the judge and they were in fact wrong.**
- They were in fact under the judgment of God.

App: So you cannot "love God" but reject Jesus at the same time.

- Rejecting the Son is rebelling against God, because it was God who sent the Son into the world.
- **Our world is filled with vague God-talk, or vague belief talk. But it all hinges on what you do with Jesus Christ specifically.**

51: A remarkable promise! "If you keep my word, you will **never see death.**" (cf., 21)

- You can beat death?
- **Forrest Gump... is an intriguing film because you have a guy with a simple mind dealing with all the complexities of life, like...**
 - Alabama football (that evil empire)
 - The 70's
 - The Vietnam war
 - Watergate
 - The meaning of love – "I might not be a smart man, but I know what love is."
 - And.... The mystery of **death**
- There's something funny but also heartbreaking is when Forrest is speaking to Jenny's grave... **"Momma always said dyin' was a part of life. I sure wish it wasn't... Jenny, I**

don't know if Momma was right ... I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze, but I, I think maybe it's both. Maybe both is happening at the same time.”

- For most people, there's nothing so mysterious in life as death.
- And for most people, like Forrest, something they so wish weren't part of life.
- But it is. Everyone dies... even if you drink purified water, and eat all your meals from Whole foods... you will die full of purified water and a stomach full of whole foods...

And that's why we need this text ... because everyone dies.

Death is the incontrovertible evidence that sin is in the world (Rom 6:23)

Because of sin, death is a reality that we must deal with...

- Maybe you are caring for aging parents or are concerned for them...
- Maybe concerned with a loved one with health struggles....
- We often hear of unexpected deaths: weather-related disasters, tragic accidents, crime/Injustice.
- And we must deal with our own death personally
- That's the bad news.
- Good news? What if there's a Person who can fix this problem? There is!
- Through Jesus, the curse of death is broken! There is a way out!

52: He reiterates it. “If anyone keeps my word, he will **never taste death**”

- Jesus sets himself apart from every spiritual leader in Judaism, including Abraham.
- The worst thing is not to die; it's to die without Jesus.
- To die is gain – it's an upgrade!

“**Keeps my word**”

- More than just praying a prayer, or attending church. This requires faith and trust and perseverance in the faith.
- It's about being his **disciple (8:31, abiding his word – being nourished by it, being in the sway of it)**

“Keeps **my word**”

- In the singular here; John uses the plural often, but in 8:31, 37, 50, 52 it's singular.
- That is, it's the summation of his words.
- And the summation of his word is displayed in *Himself*. In some way, all of his words point to Him.
- The word gets us to Jesus. The way we enjoy sweet fellowship with the person of Jesus is by spending time in His word.
- It's not about being a scholar; this has nothing to do with higher education.
- You can have sweet fellowship with Jesus and not have a lot of education. It's do you sit under his word?
- If you do you enjoy nourishment now, and live forevermore in him.

- **You are his disciple (8:31)**

Let's think about this promise so more...

1. Who's this promise for?

This promise of eternal life is both inclusive and exclusive...

A. Inclusive: If **"anyone"** keeps my word. For all people **regardless of ethnicity, economics, or experience.**

There's hope here.

Whatever category the world might put you in, you are not disqualified from hearing and believing.

I have a friend with the IMB who tells the following story:

"My mother married a Muslim man when I was only seven years old."

- And so, began the testimony of Ashley Martin last April while I was in Cape Town, South Africa.
- Ashley confessed that as a young man growing up in a Muslim's home that all he wanted to be was...a gang member.
- Lavender Hill is a gang-infested area of Cape Town, South Africa.
- His wish came true and he was a gang member.
- But that wasn't good enough. He wanted to join a gang feared by all.
- To accomplish that goal, he would have to go to prison...because, that's where all the gang members came from for that most feared gang of all.
- So, Ashley and some other gang members made a plan to rob a rich man
 - One night, they staked out an ATM
 - A "rich man" came to get money
 - As he returned to his parked car, Ashley pounced.
 - Pushed to the middle of the front seat, gun to head demanding keys
 - Other gang members jumped in back seat
 - Shouting, chaos
- The victim slowly raised his hands to his head and leaned forward.
- The man began to cry out for Jesus: "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"
- Miraculously, Ashley's brave gangsters bolted from the back seat!
- Ashley stiffened up.
- The man in the car prayed for peace... And then he asked, "What do you want God to do for you?"
- Ashley said, "I want God to save me!"
- **So there, at the scene of the crime, Ashley was led to Christ by his victim.**
- **Ashley now works with the IMB in planting churches.**

"If anyone" – including a violent gang member...

There's mission here. IDC, we have an inclusive mission that reaches to the ends of the earth!

- This is why we **pray**.
 - The mission is bigger than us. Left to our strength and our own strategies, we will fail. We need divine help. God is the one who changes hearts.
- This is why we **give**.
 - What does it take to spread the good news that Jesus offers eternal life to the ends of the earth? On the most practical level, it takes resources.
 - Generosity fuels mission.
- This is why we **go**.
 - Our life is hidden with Christ, therefore, we can sacrifice everything to make sure the gospel gets there in time.

B. **Exclusive: Jesus alone can provide eternal life.**

- There's no third option; no middle way.
- No one else's lead to eternal life.

2. **What does this promise mean?**

- It means you will not face eternal death! You will have eternal life!
- Soon we will get to **John 11:25**.
- You will die physically, but you will be in the presence of the Lord spiritually.
- **For the Christian, physical death is a vehicle into the presence of Jesus in heaven.** (Lk 23:43, Phil 1:23)
- **Here, we walk by faith and not by sight.**
- **But death provides the opportunity to walk by sight!**

Eternal life is both a **future glory**, and a **present reality**, for God's people!

- Colossians 3:3-4 "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."
- **Your life is just as secure as Jesus's place at the right hand of the Father!**
- **"Some day you will read in the papers that D.S. Moody of East Northfield, is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now; I shall have gone up higher; that is all, out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal – a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned unto His glorious body." (Moody)**

3. **Why should you believe this promise?**

Because of who makes the promise!

- **"I AM"**
- The promise is as good as the person making it. And John has now spent 8 chapters trying to convince us that Jesus is the divine Son of God!
- He is the Alpha and Omega. HE stands behind this promise!

Because of what Jesus accomplished at the cross and in his resurrection!

- He drank the cup of wrath, so we won't taste it.
- We drink grace because he took our place!
- He rose that we may live.

#2: The Preeminence of Jesus (8:53-56)

53: So they ask Jesus, “Are you greater than our father Abraham, and the prophets?”

- They are expecting a “no” answer.
- They are being **antagonistic** and **aggressive**.

Answer: **Yes!**

- **He's not just a prophet of God; He is the God of the prophets!**
- **Abraham was the Father of Israel, but Jesus is the fulfillment of everything Israel was meant to be!**
- **All of their hopes come alive in Christ**

This is a continuation of the previous dialogue – about who's the Father of the Pharisees.

- **In the first century world, sons almost always took on the vocation of the father.**
- If you're father was a baker, you were a **baker**; if a **farmer**, then you were a farmer, and so on. Jesus' father Joseph, was a carpenter, so Jesus was the **Carpenter's son**.
- **You reflected the identity and work of your father.**
- Jesus says his identity is bound up with God the Father, and his actions reflect the Father in heaven; but **the Pharisees reflect their spiritual father, the Devil.**
- **He doesn't deny that Abraham was their Father biologically; but rather spiritually.**
- **If we are in Jesus, adopted sons and daughters of God, we're called to reflect our Father.**

54: Jesus leaves the question about Abraham and **returns to the topic of glory.**

- While Jesus **deflects self-glory, this doesn't mean that he is not glorified, nor worthy of glory.**
- The Father glorifies him (Jn 17).
- **The Jews thinking he's trash. The Father thinks differently.**
- **This is ultimately what matters to us as well – not what people think of us, but what God says about us!**
 - **Satan will constantly accuse you.**
 - **He will remind you of your past before you met Christ.**
 - **When he reminds you of your past, remind him of Jesus' past, and of your future.**

55: Jesus says, “you don't know God.”

- This is darkness on display: ignorance.
- **They don't want to listen, to learn; they are lost in blind self-righteousness.**

56: Now Jesus returns to **Abraham**.

- Jesus says, “**You are being false to your ancestor, for he rejoiced to see the day of Christ.**” That is, he rejoiced **at the incarnation and his work.**
- Jesus doesn’t refer to specifics, only that Abraham looked forward to the coming of the Messiah.
- I take this as a summary statement of Abraham’s faith (Heb 11) – in many ways Abraham rejoiced to see that day.
- Specific ways:
 - Gen. 12:1-3 – when God made the covenant
 - Gen. 17 – the birth of Isaac as the onset of the promise that through Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed
 - Gen. 22:8; 13-18 – Abraham’s confidence during the sacrifice of Isaac that God would provide for himself a lamb

There was no outrage at the thought that Abraham looked forward to the messianic age.

- **There was much outrage, however, that Jesus claimed to be that Messiah.**
- What they could not stomach is the fact that the “Day of the Lord” is **Jesus’s day!** Abraham rejoiced to see “my day.”

Here’s what happens with Jesus – you rejoice in him or you revolt against him.

#3: The Preexistence of Jesus (8:57-59)

57: The Jews think Jesus is out of his mind – How can you know Abraham when you’re not even 50!?

58: We reach the climactic verse now: “**Before Abraham Was, I am.**”

- John began his gospel by talking about Jesus’ **pre-existence.** (1:1-2)
- “**Jesus always was *wasing*.**” He is the Alpha and Omega.
- There never was a time in which Jesus was *not* (to paraphrase Athanasius)

Why didn’t Jesus say, “**Before Abraham was, I was.**”?

- Because he’s not **just** claiming that he existed **before** Abraham.
- He’s taking the holy name of God given in Exodus 3:14 upon himself.
- **Some 17 times in the gospel of John Jesus will use this “I am” construct, but this may well be the clearest, most obvious claim of deity.**
- Some say Jesus never claimed to be God. They must have skipped over these claims, and right past John 8:58!

Again, John is so **focused on you understanding the person of Christ.**

- Many today, say, they like something of the teachings of Jesus, of say, some of his ethics; but that’s not the issue so far in John – it’s his person!

Who is Jesus Christ?

It's an often-used quote, but it's hard to find a better statement than C.S. Lewis:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God [By the way, no where in the gospels does Jesus say, “Hey, you guys accept me as a moral teacher, will you?"]. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

59: Defiance. They want to kill him.

- John doesn't give us any follow up on the statement, just their reaction
- Their reaction proves that they understood what Jesus was claiming.

Stoning was the prescribed punishment for blasphemy (*although intended to be carried out as the result of judicial process, not mob violence*).

This was not the first time they tried to kill Jesus, and once again, he would escape because it was not yet his time.

It was not the kind of death that was planned for him.

- Jesus says in John 10:18 that his life would not be taken away from him, but he would lay it down of his own accord.
- Jesus was sovereign over his own death.
- Jesus's death would be a sacrificial, atoning death.

His death would solve the problem of death by removing the source – sin.

Jesus would **not** defeat death by **escaping** it, but by **enduring** it.

And then **render it powerless by rising from the dead! Never to die again!**

You see, Father Abraham didn't have to put his son to death; Isaac was spared. But Paul reminds us of the great substitution: “The Father did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all...” (Rom 8:32).

Jesus died the death we deserved to die, in order that we may not see and taste death.

“Earth and Heaven”

Valley of Vision

Here are gross comforts, more burden
than benefit,
there, is joy without sorrow,
comfort without suffering,
love without inconstancy,
rest without weariness.

Give me to know that heaven is all love,
where the eye affects the heart,
and the continual viewing of thy beauty
keeps the soul in continual transports
of delight.

Give me to know that heaven is all peace,
where error, pride, rebellion, passion
raise no head.

Give me to know that heaven is all joy,
the end of believing, fasting, praying,
mourning, humbling, watching,
fearing, repining;

And lead me to it soon.

**All love, all peace, all joy – all in Jesus.
Such is the saint's view of death.**

**Don't revolt against the one with these bold claims; respond to Him with genuine belief
and adoration.**