

“Light of the World”

The Twenty-Eighth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 8:12-30; Isaiah 49:1-7

Jesus stood up during the water pouring ritual on the “Great Day” of the Feast of Booths and cried out, “*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’*” Throughout the entire time Jesus had been in Jerusalem during the week-long celebration of the Feast, people were debating his identity. The Jews (those loyal to the Sanhedrin) felt that Jesus was a dangerous threat to the nation, and must be stopped. Yet many of the people who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast, believed that *if* Jesus was not the Christ, then at the very least he was the great prophet foretold by Moses. But no one could remain neutral about Jesus. Jesus spoke with the authority of YHWH. He had a mastery of Scripture which no one had ever seen. And then there were the miracles. Jesus healed people and cast out demons with a single command. The religious leaders hated him because he exposed their self-righteousness. They were already plotting his death, while many, John says, believed in him. Who is this man? How can he say the things that he does? What is the nature of his ministry? What is he seeking to accomplish?

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we resume where we left off last time (John 7:52), with whole city of Jerusalem, it seems, debating the identity of Jesus and trying to figure out the nature of his messianic mission. From the time Jesus arrived mid-Feast, until his declaration during the final water ritual that he is the “living water,” Jesus was engaged in continual controversy with the religious leaders of Israel—who, as we have seen, were already looking for a way to arrest Jesus and then put him to death. This is why chapters 7-10 of John’s Gospel are said to describe the “conflict phase” of Jesus’ messianic mission. Jesus’ mission has brought him to Jerusalem, and although his hour has not yet come, Jesus is preparing his disciples for that time when he will go away to that place where they cannot come (his ascension). And, he must fulfill all righteousness through his perfect obedience to the law of Moses.

Those who were in Jerusalem as pilgrims attending the feast, as well as the city’s inhabitants, were also greatly divided over the question of Jesus’ identity. Some believed in Jesus. Others were not sure who, exactly, he was. Is he the Christ, the prophet, or some sort of zealot? Those loyal to the Sanhedrin were so angered by Jesus’ messianic claims that they sought to seize him and turn him over to the Pharisees. The controversy surrounding Jesus in John 7:40 ff., leads to a direct encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees (beginning in John 8:12)—an encounter which, very likely, took place shortly after Jesus stood up and claimed to be the living water during that portion of the ritual in which water was poured out on the ground as symbolic of God’s provision of life-giving water to Israel in the wilderness and believed by the Jews to foretell of the messianic age, when God will give pure water to the whole world from a great rock (like that in the wilderness). Jesus’ claim to give living water during this moment in the Feast was clearly a messianic claim. Jesus’ comments did not go unnoticed by the Pharisees, who were just waiting for Jesus to say or do the wrong thing.

You may be wondering why I am skipping John 7:53-8:11. The reason is that the manuscript evidence is overwhelming. The story of the woman caught in adultery is not found in any of the best and earliest manuscripts. In fact, none of the early translations of the New Testament include John 7:53-8:11 (like the Syriac, Coptic, and old Latin versions), and none of the verses in this section are cited by any of the church fathers. Although the story is found in many medieval manuscripts, those scribes copying the

various editions of the New Testament acknowledged that they had great doubts about the authenticity of these verses since they were not found in any of the early manuscripts with which they were familiar.

When you read these verses in place, this section actually interrupts flow of thought from Jesus' declaration to be the living water (John 7:37-38) followed by his declaration that he is the light of the world in John 8:12. The section has the feel of not belonging where it is. That said, the account of the woman caught in adultery does have what one textual scholar describes as "all the earmarks of historical veracity." This is why all of the modern English translations still include the text in John, yet bracket it off as not belonging to the best and earliest manuscripts, and most commentaries place comment on this section in an appendix.¹ I agree with this approach, and feel it best to let you all know why I am skipping over this section of John (as we did with the longer ending of Mark's Gospel). These are two of the only three places in the whole of the New Testament where we have good reason to believe that the verses in our Bible are not in the earliest (original) text. The third is 1 John 5:7.

If we skip John 7:53-8:11 and pick up with John 8:12, we see the seamless flow from Jesus' assertion in John 7:37-38—"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water,'" and John's word of explanation in verse 39—"now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified"—to another messianic claim made by Jesus in John 8:12 to be the light of the world. As we saw last time, John breaks off (verses 40-44) to reveal what was going on among the people—an intense debate about Jesus' identity, followed by the account of the internal debate recounted among the members of the Sanhedrin in verses 45-52 over what to do about the threat which Jesus posed to their power and prestige.

As we pick up with verse 12 of John 8, we find John's account of what happened after the Sanhedrin rebuked the temple police (the Levites) for failing to arrest Jesus. Apparently, the Pharisees took it upon themselves to confront Jesus directly due to his messianic claims regarding the living water. This occurred at some point (probably not long) after Jesus spoke in the temple area provoking the debate about his identity among the people. In verse 12, we read, "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" The "again" indicates that Jesus is still speaking to the people in the temple on the great day of the feast.

Some historical background to Jesus' statement is important. At day's end of each of the seven days of the Feast of Booths, four large lamps were lit in the temple's court for women. As it grew dark, the people in the temple area lit torches, danced, sang hymns as accompanied by a Levitical orchestra (trumpets, ram's horns, stringed instruments, etc.). The light from the celebration each evening of the Feast lit up much of the city and the glow from the torches was visible for miles.² When Jesus says, "I am the light of the world," he is claiming to be the one who fulfills that which is foreshadowed by the lighting of the torches each night of the Feast—the gospel going to the ends of the earth.

This is also the second time Jesus uses the "I AM" formula (*ego emi*). The first instance was back in the "bread of life" discourse in John 6:35. This expression, as we have seen, is one of the self-designations

¹ Bruce Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (NY: UBS, 1975), 219-222.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 337.

used by YHWH. Once again, Jesus uses it of himself. Before we look in a bit more detail at the Old Testament background to Jesus' declaration, it is important to realize that these words are spoken only after Jesus has already made a profound and remarkable messianic claim. When Jesus spoke of himself as the living water (in John 7:37-38) he was claiming that all of the messianic imagery in the Old Testament associated with a pure and overflowing water (especially Isaiah 55:1-9 and Zechariah 14:16-19), actually points forward to himself, and to the gift of the Holy Spirit which will be poured out upon the people of God at Pentecost—after Jesus' betrayal and arrest, his death, resurrection and ascension (the meaning of his assertion that he must "go away").

By crying out these words—"if anyone thirsts"—at the critical moment of the water-pouring ritual of the Feast of Booths, Jesus was also claiming to be the rock in the wilderness which poured forth water to keep the Israelites alive. In effect, Jesus is re-writing the entire history of Israel—placing himself at the center of everything. This is why we, as Christians, must read the Old Testament through the lens given us by Jesus and his disciples. At the same time, in saying this during the highly symbolic messianic portion of the feast, Jesus is declaring that a New Exodus is about to begin, and that he will be the one to lead it. He is the covenant mediator (the new and better Moses of whom we read in the Book of Hebrews). He is the Christ, who will lead his people into a new age of salvation from sin's guilt and power. The people knew the importance of Jesus' words, even if they did not fully understand them. This is what prompted all the debate among them. This is what brought the Pharisees a'runnin.

When Jesus declares "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,*" he is continuing to point the Jews back to the Old Testament in order to demonstrate to them that he is the promised one. He begins by using a self-designation of YHWH ("I AM") of himself, but he goes on to speak of himself as the light. Like the metaphor of water for the Holy Spirit, so too light is a metaphor for the revelation of the truth of God's word which was thought to dawn in its fulness in the messianic age.

Recall, that in the prologue to his Gospel, John has already identified Jesus as "*the light of men.*" John has told us that "*the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" And then he goes on to say, "*the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.*" Now, we see the historical circumstance—Jesus' declaration in John 8:12 to be the light—to which these statements in the prologue of John point. There are a number of references to "light" throughout the Old Testament. Even a short list shows how pervasive the metaphor is in Jewish history and theology. The glory of God (the pillar of fire) both led the Israelites through the wilderness, and then protected them from the Egyptians (Exodus 13-14). The law of God is described as a lamp to direct us (Ps. 119:105). God is said to reveal himself in light (Ezekiel 1:4, 26-28). Salvation is said to be light (Habakkuk 3:3-4). And the Psalmist proclaims, "*the Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*" Psalm 27:1).

One of the most significant of the messianic references to light is found in Isaiah 49:6, part of our Old Testament lesson. "*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*" Isaiah foretold that the Messiah (the Christ) will bring salvation (light) to the ends of the earth—even to the Gentiles—during the messianic age. In Isaiah 60:19-20, YHWH declares "*the sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.*" Yet another remarkable reference is found in Zechariah 14:5-7 expressed in apocalyptic imagery, "*then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day*

there shall be no light, cold, or frost. And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.” The prophets connect the revelation of God’s truth and his promised salvation to that time when messianic light will shine. With the torches in the temple probably burning, Jesus tells the people (with all of this messianic and prophetic imagery in mind), *“I am the light of the world.”*

By the time Jesus says this, the Pharisees have arrived. Their arrest warrant has not been served and Jesus is still in the temple demonstrating to the people that he is the Christ. The Pharisees challenge Jesus directly. They have no idea what they are in for, nor with whom they are dealing. According to verse 13, they challenge Jesus’ truthfulness by accusing him of lying. *“So the Pharisees said to him, ‘You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true.’”* These men have long and accurate memories. They challenge Jesus with the words he spoke to them earlier (back in John 5:31) during their prior encounter with Jesus when they accused him of breaking the Sabbath and making himself equal with God. At that time, Jesus declared, *“If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true.”* The Law of Moses required two witnesses for someone’s testimony to be admissible in a court of law. The Pharisees have obviously thought about this charge carefully. They think they have Jesus trapped—he said *“If I testify about myself, I am lying.”* They don’t.

The Pharisees either misunderstood what Jesus had said, or else they intentionally misrepresent him. *“Jesus answered, ‘Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.’”* Jesus did not say that since he had no witnesses he was a liar. He did say that he had the authority to testify about these things because YHWH gave him the words to say, and then sent him to Israel to say the things he had been saying. The Pharisees were examining everything Jesus said and did for one reason—to catch him in a lie, for Jesus to make a mistake, or for Jesus to mis-speak in such a way that they could accuse him of lying, and therefore declare him a law-breaker. Even better, since this was happening in public the Pharisees could then summon a host of witnesses who heard Jesus lie, make an error, mis-speak, etc. Then, they could turn the tables on Jesus and condemn him using the testimony of witnesses

Jesus restates his original point. He has the authority to testify about himself because he is the eternal son of God, the word made flesh, who has enjoyed eternal fellowship within the Holy Trinity. Jesus knows his divine origin which is the ground for his testimony, while his accusers do not believe him. Jesus knows where he came from. He knows where he is going (back to the Father) after his coming death, resurrection, and ascension. The Pharisees are spiritually blind and have no clue.

As Jesus tells them in verse 15—however compelling their legal argument might appear—*“You judge according to the flesh.”* The Pharisees are attempting to pass judgment on God in human flesh, who also happens to be “the Christ.” They have no understanding of who Jesus is and what he has come to do. All they know is that Jesus is not playing by their rules (because those rules are grounded in sinful self-righteousness) and that he is an imminent threat to everything they hold dear. Their own Messiah has come to save his people from the guilt and power of sin, and the false shepherds of Israel have obviously spent months seeking for some technicality as a pretense to arrest him and put him to death. But then this is what happens when we judge according to the flesh. How can sinful people make anything other than sinful judgments about holy things?

But Jesus is not finished responding. *“I judge no one.”* Scholars debate whether or not Jesus is referring to judgment in the sense of John 3:17—*“for God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”*—or if he is saying something like, “I do

not judge the way you do—according to the flesh.”³ In the context of the debate, the latter fits the context much better. “I do not judge according to sinful flesh.” In verse 16, Jesus adds, “*yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.*” In John 5:27, Jesus already told the Pharisees that YHWH has given him authority to judge all things. If the Pharisees do not accept this it is because they judge according to the sinful self-righteousness of the flesh. Accept it or not, Jesus tells them one more time his judgment is true because he judges on YHWH’s authority. Jesus is executing YHWH’s judgment.

The Pharisees who heard Jesus say this, must have been saying to themselves, “are we hearing this right?” “Is he saying he is one with YHWH, and that YHWH is his witness?” Even as they were trying to process all of this, Jesus continues refute their charge. In verses 17-18, Jesus went on to say “*in your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.*” Jesus uses their own oral tradition against them by referring to the law of Moses as “their law.” Jesus is the author of the law, he gave it Israel, the law bears witness to him, and it is fulfilled by his own obedience. But you would never know that by the looking at the way the Pharisees were handling the law, which when filtered through their oral tradition, the law of Moses (which God gave Israel) had morphed into “their law,” the law of the Pharisees. The Father and the Son are in complete and perfect agreement. Jesus can bear witness about himself, because the Father bears witness about him. He also uses the “I AM” formula one more time.

The Pharisees still do not get it, and indeed cannot. According to verse 19, “*they said to him therefore, ‘Where is your Father?’*” Not understanding (or rejecting) Jesus’ claim to divine origin (his eternal pre-existence with the heavenly Father) the Pharisees demand that Jesus tell them from where he came. “Show us your family tree!” “Identify your father.” But this is another trick. Presumably the Pharisees knew about Joseph and Jesus’ ties to Galilee. The question is framed to catch Jesus in a lie—if Jesus says his Father is Joseph of Bethlehem, then he is lying about YHWH being his father. If Jesus says “YHWH” is his Father, then he is blaspheming and lying about the fact that Joseph is his father. These men refuse to accept Jesus’ testimony or his messianic credentials. “*Jesus answered, ‘You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.’*” Jesus calls them unbelievers, exposing their ignorance of the same God they claim to be defending. The Pharisees do not know YHWH. Jesus’ words surely infuriated them.

In verse 20, John specifies where this took place. “*These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.*” No one dared arrest Jesus. And Jesus did not stop teaching the people. As we read in verse 21, yet another incident soon follows. “*So he said to them again, ‘I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.’*” Jesus continues to refer to his cross and the empty tomb. Jesus will not die until the coming Passover (still several months away). He will be raised from the dead and then ascend into heaven. Then no one will find him. Then those who do not believe in him will perish in their sins.

Those hearing Jesus do not understand and are struggling to figure out the meaning of his words. “*So the Jews said, ‘will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come?’*” Is he talking about suicide? Martyrdom? Jesus will explain this to them. In verses 23-24, “*he said to them, ‘You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.’*” Jesus came down from heaven in

³ See the discussion in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 339.

his incarnation. He is the eternal son of God, whose glory is now veiled in human flesh. Jesus is not enslaved by sinful human passions, like those to whom he is speaking, who belong to “the world” (the non-Christian way of thinking and doing). One more time he tells them, “unless you believe in me, you will die in your sins.”

The people remain dumbfounded. “*So they said to him, ‘Who are you?’*” Jesus answers them, “*just what I have been telling you from the beginning. I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.*” Jesus is the eternal son of God, the word made flesh, the Son of Man, the Christ who will lead the new Israel in a New Exodus. He has not hidden this from them. In fact, he has much more to say. Jesus even has more to say about the coming judgment. But given the circumstances and the confusion among the people, at this point it is enough for them to believe (trust) that what Jesus says is true. He has been sent from YHWH to speak forth the word of God and to accomplish those things YHWH sent him to do.

The people still do not understand that Jesus was speaking about eternal things—not earthly things. John tells us, “*they did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father.*” They cannot grasp the pre-existence of Jesus, that he is God incarnate, the fact that he speaks the words of YHWH, and that YHWH has sent him to do his will. Nevertheless, Jesus points the people ahead to that one event where his true glory will be revealed and the purpose of his messianic mission will become crystal clear. “*So Jesus said to them, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.’*” It is not until Jesus suffers and dies upon the cross as a sacrifice for sin that the meaning and purpose all of his mission will become clear. Then God’s people will know that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. When Jesus is lifted up on the cross, then they will see Jesus’ perfect obedience to the Father’s will. Then they will know that Jesus has spoken those words the Father has given him to say.

Jesus knows he is not alone as he fulfills all righteousness and faces the unbelief of his people and the plotting of the Sanhedrin, and the hatred directed at him by those who claim to be doing the Father’s will, but who are simply indulging their own sinful flesh. Jesus tells those listening to him, “*he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.*” Despite the difficulties he will face, Jesus will remain obedient to the law and fulfill his messianic mission, for Jesus knows this pleases the Father who has sent him. Nothing will thwart his purposes.

As proof that Jesus is who he claims to be, John inserts a single sentence (verse 30) which demonstrates that everything which Jesus says is true, and is our point of application. “*As he was saying these things, many believed in him.*” Jesus’ preaching was so compelling that a significant number those present placed their trust in Jesus. We know that faith follows upon regeneration and the gift of eternal life, and we also know that faith and regeneration are connected to the preaching of the Gospel. John’s point is that even though Jesus is being challenged, confronted, questioned, doubted, and even while the Pharisees seek to put an end to his messianic mission, Jesus proves himself to be both the living water and the light of the world. The people may still wonder about his identity, but he has now made it plain. He is the Christ.

Despite the confusion and opposition, Jesus gave many of those present in the temple eternal life and faith. John says many believed. The great irony in all of this is that Jesus is giving eternal life, while the Pharisees are seeking his death for doing that very thing.