

“Before Abraham Was, I Am”

The Thirtieth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 8:48-59; Exodus 3:1-17

Jesus went to Jerusalem during the Feast of Booths and began teaching in the temple. Crowds quickly gathered to hear him. On the last day of the Feast, Jesus declared that he would be the one who will give the people of God living water (the gift of the Holy Spirit). Jesus also declared that he was the light of the world. Both declarations were loaded with messianic implications. When the Pharisees arrived, they began to debate publically with Jesus, attempting to use his words against him, hoping to trap him in an error which would discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people. The people watching were greatly divided about Jesus’ identity and mission. Some believed in Jesus and possessed eternal life. Others are said to “believe in Jesus” but do so only for a time and fall away when Jesus says something difficult, or does something they do not like. Meanwhile, the Pharisees are plotting to kill Jesus, and the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees continues to intensify. As it does, the Pharisees make their most serious charge against Jesus yet, and Jesus responds with the clearest declaration so far as to his divine identity.

As we resume our series on John’s Gospel, we pick up where we left off last time in John 8 (with verse 48), during the so-called “conflict phase” of Jesus’s ministry (which includes the material in John 7-10). In addition to speaking of himself as the source of living water and the light of the world, Jesus has been repeatedly speaking of the fact that he is about to go away, and that where he is going, no one can come. Those who know John’s Gospel, know that Jesus was speaking about his own death, resurrection, and ascension which was drawing near. Throughout this section of his Gospel, John has made it clear that Jesus’ hour has not yet arrived—the reason John gives as to why the Pharisees plot to put Jesus to death has not succeeded.

After asserting himself to be the one who gives living water as well as the light of the world, the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees grows increasingly intense. Forcing people in the crowd to decide whether they are with Jesus or against him, Jesus told those Jews who profess to believe him, “*if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (John 8:31-32). The proof that someone has eternal life (and therefore has genuine faith) is that they will abide (remain) by trusting in Jesus until the end of their lives. Those who are truly Christ’s are preserved to the end in this faith by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Those who have temporary faith (not genuine) do not abide. Because the saving work of Christ has not been applied to them, they will fall away when things get tough—as we saw in the “Bread of Life” discourse back in John 6 and here in the debate recorded in John 8.

The Jews are totally perplexed about Jesus’ comment about him setting them free since even though Israel was then under Roman occupation, the Jews were back in the land and they were still free to practice their religion. Jesus will explain this matter to them. “*Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.*” The Jews still do not grasp the fact that Jesus is using slavery as a metaphor for the guilt and power of sin, and that he speaks of freedom in terms of that redemption which he will accomplish on the cross to set his people free. The Jews challenge Jesus by reminding him that they are children of Abraham. Why would they need to be set free? What kind of freedom can Jesus provide which they don’t already have (except political freedom)?

Jesus responds by exposing the plot of the Pharisees to kill him. Those who claim to be free, demonstrate that they are actually slaves to sin by seeking to put their own Messiah to death. *“If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.”* Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (cf. Genesis 15:6). Abraham did good works which manifest his faith in the promise. James says, *“you see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works”* (James 2:22). Those who claim to be children of Abraham cannot claim to be his true descendants while they are plotting to kill the one of whom Abraham foretold (as we will see later in our text). No, those plotting to kill Jesus are not the children of Abraham. Rather, they are children of their father, the devil.

Having raised the matter of true fatherhood, in verses 42-47 Jesus went on to tell the crowd, *“if God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”* Jesus explains why there is such hostility to him and to his teaching. The Jews do not understand (hear) Jesus when he speaks the words of YHWH, because they are not of YHWH. Despite the national family tree which takes them back to Abraham, those in Jerusalem confronting Jesus may be Jews, but they are not of God. They do not and cannot hear God's voice in Jesus' words.

Jesus' statement infuriates the Pharisees and those allied with them all the more. This brings us to the point where we left up last time (in mid-debate). Remember, tempers are beginning to flare, and now the unthinkable happens—the Pharisees respond to Jesus with an accusation which is difficult to even repeat, and which has grave and eternal consequences. These shocking words come in verse 48. *“The Jews answered him, ‘Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?’”* The Jews cannot trap Jesus with his own words. They cannot justify their actions from redemptive history, nor from the law of Moses. Jesus has proven them to be self-righteous law-breakers. The more the Pharisees argue with Jesus, the more they condemn themselves. The only thing they have succeeded in proving is that they are driven by nothing but self-interest and self-preservation.

The Jews resort to one of the lowest of human acts—they call Jesus a Samaritan. This does not mean much to us, but for a Jew to call another Jew a “Samaritan” was to use an insulting racial slur (which was the equivalent in that culture of using the “n” word in our own), and which was likely tied to the accusation that Jesus was illegitimate. The sense is, “is your father a Samaritan?” “Are you the son of an inferior half-breed?” Jesus has been claiming that YHWH is his Father, and this is their response.

As if this was not bad enough, the Jews also accuse Jesus of being demon possessed, recalling to mind the incident described in Mark 3:22-30, when certain Jews from Jerusalem went to Galilee to confront Jesus early on in his messianic mission. In his account, Mark tells us, *“the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, ‘[Jesus] is possessed by Beelzebul,’ [the prince of demons] and ‘by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.’ And [Jesus] called them to him and said to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. But no one can enter a strong man's house and*

plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.” In verses 28-30, Jesus pronounces the most extreme covenant curse upon these men. *“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—for they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’”*

Therefore, John’s account is not the first time certain members of the Jewish religious leadership have accused Jesus of being demon-possessed. According to Jesus, this is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit (who indwells Jesus and empowers Jesus to perform miracles). Such blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is also a sin which cannot be forgiven, and inevitably leads to eternal punishment. Throughout the centuries, many Christians have worried about whether or not they have committed the unpardonable sin, but the very fact that someone worries about doing this is the surest proof that they haven’t. This sin, in my estimation, is directly tied to those who saw Jesus perform a miracle in the power of the Holy Spirit, and then attributed that act to the power of Satan. If true, this is a sin which cannot be committed now that Jesus has ascended into heaven.

In the case before us (John 8:48), the Pharisees in the crowd are angry and attempting to respond to Jesus’ charge that they are serving their father the devil who was a murderer and a liar from the beginning—this charge from Jesus really stung because the Pharisees were doing both and Jesus has demonstrated this to the crowds. The Pharisees have stooped to a new low, responding to Jesus using a racial slur and accusing Jesus of being demon-possessed. John does not say that they have committed the unpardonable sin, but the circumstances are quite similar to Mark’s account, and at the very least, John makes it plain that the religious leaders of Israel are so blind to the truth, and so deaf to the voice of God, that they accuse their own Messiah of being demon-possessed. The whole scene is utterly tragic, and is the clearest sign yet in John’s Gospel of the gravity of Israel’s sin and unbelief. The distance between thinking that your own Messiah is demon-possessed and then to plotting to kill him is not great.

Jesus’ response to these charges is to return to the subject at hand—namely his person and work. *“Jesus answered, ‘I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.’”* There is nothing about Jesus’ conduct which would even hint to the fact that Jesus might be demon-possessed. Jesus has done nothing to indicate he is mentally unstable, or that he is a danger to himself and others. No one has been able to prove otherwise. Jesus has spoken the truth. He has spoken the words of YHWH. And yet, he is hated by his own people, and subject to such insults and horrible blasphemies precisely because he is sent from YHWH to obey his Father’s will, and to fulfill all righteousness so that Israel might be saved from their sins. Imagine, Israel’s own Messiah having to respond to the accusation of demon possession . . .

The degree of hatred Jesus faced surely arises from the fact that in order to be saved from the guilt of your sins, you must admit to being a sinner in need of a Savior, and therefore, you must renounce all forms of self-righteousness. But this is the one thing the Pharisees and Sanhedrin refuse to do, because it would force them to admit that they were not the paragons of virtue they claim to be. These men hate Jesus for exposing them to be the self-righteous deceivers that they are. Unable to refute Jesus from Scripture, they pitifully resort to calling him names and blaspheming—the latter, as we have seen, is something the Pharisees have consistently accused Jesus of doing.

Yet Jesus’ actions make perfect sense when seen through the eyes of faith and against the backdrop of redemptive history. *“Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.”* Everything Jesus has done has brought glory to God—from his preaching, to his miracles, to his casting out demons. From the beginning of his messianic mission until this very moment, Jesus has sought to

please the Father who sent him. Jesus has spoken only those words given him by the Father. Jesus has only done those things which the Father commanded him to do. He has come to fulfill all righteousness, and as Jesus himself has said, the nature of his mission (as one of redemption) will become clear *“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.”* When Jesus dies on the cross and is raised from the dead, then the glory of God will be revealed.

This is why in verse 51, Jesus goes on to say, *“truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”* Jesus has already declared that he is the one who gives life. When he had been in Jerusalem the previous year he made this same point. In John 5:24-29, we read these words from Jesus, which are re-stated here in John 8:51. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. `Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”* As we saw when we covered this passage, it is YHWH who gives life (regeneration) and it is YHWH who raises the dead on the last day (the day of judgment). Yet, Jesus claims that he does these things. He is saying that he is one with YHWH.

In no uncertain terms, Jesus has told the Jews that they do not hear God’s words, and that they are not of YHWH. Although his hour has not yet come—it will come at the next Passover, several months off in the future—the time has come for Jesus to summon his people to faith, so as to prepare them for that time when he must go away. Jesus is not concerned with himself, but with saving all those given him by the Father. This is why Jesus declares, *“if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”*

These words only serve to enrage the Pharisees all the more. *“The Jews said to him, `Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, `If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?”* Jesus is talking about eternal life and heavenly things, while the Jews, who do not hear God’s voice in the words of Jesus, have missed the whole point. How can Jesus say that he gives life when everyone in Israel’s history, from Abraham to the prophets, lies buried?

Blinded by their self-righteousness, and unable to hear the truth in Jesus’ message, the Jews default again to accuse Jesus of being possessed by a demon. Despite their spiritual blindness and anger with Jesus, the issue which underlies this whole debate is beginning to crystalize. How can Jesus say he is greater than Abraham? How can Jesus say that he gives life when only YHWH can do this? Who does Jesus think he is? How can he say such things? The only way Jesus can say such things is if he is God incarnate. If he gives life to the dead, then he is greater than Abraham. And if he is God incarnate, then all those listening must “keep” his word (i.e., believe in him) because they have been raised from the dead (given life, regenerated, etc.). It all comes down to how one answers the question the Jews asked Jesus back in John 8:25, *“who are you?”* Jesus is about to make his identity crystal clear.

According to verses 54-55, *“Jesus answered, `If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, `He is our God.’ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word.”* Jesus takes everything the Jews have just said, and flips it back in their collective laps. Jesus has not come to

begin his own ministry, or start some sort of “Messiah” movement. Jesus has come to do the Father’s will. He has not come to bring glory to himself, but to YHWH. And yet, Jesus now adds that the Father will indeed glorify him (this will come when Jesus is lifted up on the cross) and is something for which Jesus will pray during the high priestly prayer (John 17:5): “*And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.*”

As for the Jews, once again Jesus tells them that they do not know YHWH, but that he does. Unlike the Jews, Jesus is not a liar. He keeps the words of YHWH. And then in verse 56, Jesus drops a theological bomb on the Jews. “*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.*” Some background here is necessary. Many Jews of Jesus’ day believed that in Genesis 15:17-21, God disclosed the secrets of the coming messianic age to Abraham. Jesus may be referring to this widely-held view when he speaks of Abraham rejoicing.

Or Jesus may be referring to any of a number of Old Testament texts which point to the fact that Abraham saw Jesus’ day. The first of these texts which come to mind is Genesis 22:8, when “*Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son’ [Isaac]. So they went both of them together,*” [up the mountain]. Jesus has already been identified in John’s Gospel as the “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Another text which Jesus may have in mind is Genesis 17:17. “*Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’*” Abraham’s laughter was understood by many Jewish writers to refer to great joy (and not necessarily incredulity). If this passage is in Jesus’ mind when he speaks of Abraham looking ahead to the coming of Jesus, then he would be adopting another widely-held Jewish view, namely that Abraham was rejoicing when laughing.¹

But then, this raises a huge question in the minds of those debating with Jesus. How did Jesus know that Abraham saw his day (nearly two thousand years prior)? How did Jesus know that Abraham saw the coming of Jesus, and that he was glad of it. This statement of Jesus is so packed with meaning we need to stop and consider three important points made by Jesus. The first point to consider is the very fact that Jesus claimed to know in a personal way what Abraham desired is a claim to pre-existence and therefore a claim to deity—Jesus’ birth was the manifestation of his incarnation and virginal conception in the womb of the virgin. This is certainly how the Jews present took Jesus’ statement—he was claiming to exist before his birth, which is tantamount to a claim to deity.

The second matter of importance is that Jesus is claiming that Abraham saw Jesus’ day (Jesus’ present messianic mission) and approved of it. Once again, Jesus places himself at the center of Israel’s history and reinterprets that history as though he were a first-hand witness to it—perhaps even the one orchestrating and directing Israel’s history. By interpreting the life of Abraham as though Abraham himself anticipated the coming of Jesus as the Christ, is to say that the Pharisees did not understand the true meaning of the Old Testament, and were teaching error. In effect, Jesus is accusing them of mishandling the Scriptures, and of not understanding the key events in Israel’s history. They have been wrong about everything. This would have enraged the biblical scholars in their midst.

Third, Jesus is teaching those of us who read this debate how to read and interpret the Bible—Jesus places his own person and work at the center of redemptive history. Jesus is telling the Jews that their father and patriarch (Abraham) was looking forward to the time of Jesus’ birth and ministry. This too is how

¹ See the discussion in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 356-357.

we should read the Old Testament so as not to make the same error as the Pharisees—it points forward to the person and work of Christ. Jesus tells us as much.

The Jews are completely incredulous at Jesus' statement. In verse 57, "*the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?'*" If Jesus were merely human, the Jews would have a point. But Jesus, while truly human, is not merely human. He is God incarnate, the eternal word who's glory is clothed in a true human nature. Jesus' reply is his most direct statement yet about his identity and brings the debate to a screeching halt. "*Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.'*" Another, even bigger theological bomb, has just been dropped.

With these very important and powerful words, Jesus is claiming to be pre-existent once again using the *ego emi* formula (I AM) to assert in no uncertain terms that he is eternal God, and one with YHWH. We must not miss this. Jesus is making a direct claim to deity. He is now openly and publically claiming to be the one who spoke to Moses from the burning bush: exactly as we read in our Old Testament lesson in Exodus 3:13-15. "*Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?'*" *God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'*" *God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."* Jesus is I AM. Jesus is one with YHWH.

Jesus is also claiming to be the one speaking throughout Isaiah 40-55 (YHWH), as, for example, in Isaiah 41:4, where we read, "*I, the Lord, the first, and with the last; I am he.*" Jesus' claim to deity and to be one with YHWH is confirmed by John in verse 59. Incredulity on the part of the Jews immediately gives way to rage and fury. The Jews understood full-well what Jesus meant—as shocked as they must have been upon hearing the words. John tells us that without hesitation "*they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.*" Stoning was the appropriate penalty under the law of Moses for blasphemy. Jesus has just declared himself to be God in human flesh, and the meaning of his claim was inescapable. Even as Jesus declares that he is God in human flesh, the Jews believe him to be blaspheming. As Augustine so aptly puts it, "as man [Jesus] flees from the stones, but woe to those from whose heart of stone God flees."²

As John concludes his account of the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees in the temple at the end of the Feast, John reminds us one more time of the fact that Jesus' hour has not yet come. Jesus was able to leave the temple and escape before the Jews could kill him on the spot. Jesus' hour was not yet, and there is no turning back now—that hour is drawing ever nearer. Jesus has revealed his true identity to the people of Israel in the midst of his Father's house. He is God in human flesh. The cross awaits.

What, then, do we say by way of application? In John 8:58, Jesus makes an explicit claim to deity. Every Christian should know this passage (and its connection to Exodus 3:13-15) well enough to hammer the JW's and Mormons when they come to your door, and deny the deity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity.

As for those critical scholars who say that Jesus had little in the way of messianic consciousness (that he was not aware of being deity), they must fall all over themselves in attempting to explain away a text

² Cited in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 358.

such as this one. There can be no doubt that Jesus claims to be God. As proof that he that he made such a claim, all we need do is look to the reaction of the Jews who heard Jesus that day in the temple. They immediately tried to stone him. They heard what Jesus said, and understood exactly what he meant.

It is texts such as this that distinguishes the God of the Bible (who is Triune) from Allah of Islam, or even the God of contemporary Judaism, in which Jews believe in the right God, but in a heretical and deficient way. Jesus makes a statement in John 8:58 which is impossible to ignore and which changes everything. Either his claim is true, or it is not. If Jesus speaks the truth, what prevents you from trusting in him to save you from your sins. If you don't believe his claim, why ever darken the door of a church? If Jesus' words are not true, then he cannot be a good teacher, or a prophet. Good men and great prophets do not claim to be God. When Jesus says "*before Abraham was, I AM*" he is claiming to be God and rendering all other religious claims false.

So what will it be, are you with him, or against him?