

John 8:52-59 “Before Abraham was Born, I Am”

JOH 8:51-59 I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." 52 At this the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?" 54 Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. 55 Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." 57 "You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!" 58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" 59 At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

By way of reminder this discourse between Jesus and the hostile Jewish leaders was taking place in the temple area according to John 8:20, and tensions are still heightened, along with a real animosity from some of these Jews who would love to see Jesus taken into custody and killed.

And yet, knowing this, Jesus doesn't withdraw but rather continues to give them the truth despite how they accuse Him of such things as being demon-possessed, which of course He responded to.

JOH 8:49-51 "I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. 50 I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

And this last statement by Jesus is really the issue for all of humanity. You see, it is a life and death matter.

The one who embraces Christ by faith will never see the ultimate death. But the converse is just as true. The one who does not embrace Christ by faith will suffer what the word of God calls the second death.

REV 20:14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

And so, the second death is the just punishment given to those who die in their sin as they reject the One who can deliver from God's just righteous punishment. And yet, Christ is continually extending His grace and mercy to the world so that whoever will come to Him will not be condemned in his own sin.

JOH 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

But in making the statement in verse 51 of our text where Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death," these Jews take His words in a literalistic way as they completely miss the spiritual application our Lord intends. And we see their response in the next verse.

JOH 8:52 At this the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death.

Of course, in their minds they were thinking of physical death, and if this is what Jesus had in mind this response from them would make sense. After all Abraham faithfully kept the word of God, and yet he died. The prophets of God, including Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, all kept His word as they followed and served the Lord, and they all ended up dying.

And so, you can see how their thinking would make them arrive at such a conclusion about Jesus as they thought He was not dealing in reality. Everybody dies, how can you say that if anyone keeps your word he will never taste death?

And yet, despite this reaction they are not completely in the dark as to the other alternative Jesus might be discussing which is why they continue with the next question.

JOH 8:53 Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

This by the way is a question which we find popping up periodically in the Scriptures as people cannot fathom some of the claims Jesus makes about Himself, which should alert those cults who don't believe Jesus is God, to the fact that Jesus claimed He was God.

You'll remember the woman at the well who was told by Jesus that He could give her living water.

JOH 4:12-14 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" 13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Only God can give eternal life and this is exactly what Jesus is claiming for Himself, because He is in fact the Creator God of this universe who can offer life to all who come to Him by faith. He is the only true God in the flesh as Paul points to the Romans.

ROM 9:5 Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them [the Jews] is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

The Jews in our text knew that Jesus was alluding to such a claim and again this is why they could accuse Him of being crazy as they believe He has, what some Psychologists call, a "God complex."

In their minds, only a nut would think so highly of himself. After all, if you make such claims you must be greater than Abraham whom the Lord called His friend and gave him, and his descendants, the promise of the land of Canaan. And this is why they say at the end of verse 53, "who do you think you are?"

Now the way Jesus responds is rather interesting because He doesn't answer them directly. You or I might begin our answer with the statement, "let me tell you who I am." Instead Jesus addresses the issue of glory.

JOH 8:54 Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me.

What Jesus is doing in this response is answering their question by addressing their misunderstanding of glory and the only one who can possess it in full. What this whole discussion is about is the degree of glory one has. The word glory can mean anything from an opinion one has of others, to the inherent majesty of a thing or person.

For example, when God created the world He spoke of lesser lights and greater lights.

GEN 1:16 God made two great lights - the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.

The apostle Paul makes a comment on these lights as he uses their splendor or glory to make a comparison between our earthly bodies and our glorified resurrection bodies.

1CO 15:41 The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

Paul's point was that we determine the value of something based on its inherent splendor and uniqueness. Gold has one splendor or glory, while diamonds have a greater splendor or glory. The physical body has one kind of glory but it pales in comparison to our future resurrected bodies in Christ.

By the way, the word splendor that the NIV uses in 1Cor. 15:41, ("The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another"), is the exact same Greek word Jesus uses in our text. The Jews understood that all of nature is classified in types of glories. And when our Lord is challenged as to His greatness He responds by reminding them that the glory of something determines its status.

He knows that in the minds of these people Jesus is bringing a type of glory to Himself that they will not accept. In fact, Jesus agrees with them that for anyone to simply make a claim to a certain type of glory does not make it so. This is why He agrees that, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing."

Now, it means nothing only in the eyes of these Jews He's speaking to. Obviously, when Christ makes a claim to glory it means everything because He is God. But for the sake of argument He concedes to the thinking of these people. But then He goes on to say that if someone else greater confers glory on another than the greater one has the final say.

For example, if I declare that you possess the glory of an ambassador to the nation of England, someone might simply laugh at me. But if one greater, let's say the President of the United States, declares the same glory on you, then it means something.

This is what Jesus is doing. He is conceding that His own claim to glory may not be accepted by these people, but they must all agree that if God the Father confers such glory on Him, then to deny that would dishonor both the Father and the Son.

And so, in this one statement, “My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me,” Jesus is saying that the Father has placed His approval on all of the claims and actions, (ie., miracles), Jesus has been making, which all add up to Him being of the same essence of the Father, which is to say that Jesus is truly claiming to be God Himself in the flesh.

He cannot claim to be anything less because in doing so He would deny Himself and He cannot do that which is why He continues in the next verse.

JOH 8:55 Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word.

Here Jesus reminds them again that though they may be the physical descendants of Abraham, they do not belong to the God of Abraham. They do not come under the saving grace of God the Father because they have rejected the only means of being reconciled to the Father, which is the Son sent by the Father to redeem them.

And so, in the truest sense of the word they do not know Him, though they certainly know about Him. And this is true of today. Poll after poll of people in this country shows how most Americans say they know God as they claim for themselves the title of Christian.

But knowing about God and actually knowing Him, having a relationship with Him through faith in Christ, are two different things.

In fact, many people, in the church-at-large, are doing the same thing these Jews in our text are doing. These Jews in our text have determined that their relationship with God is based on the physical lineage with Abraham, while many people in the church today are claiming to belong to God because they have simply associated themselves with the church, or because their parents claimed to be Christians.

We are not Christians because we have an association with the church or any other person in this world. We are Christians because we personally have an association with the only Savior of this world, Jesus Christ, as we humbly come before Him and ask Him to forgive us of our sin which has kept us from our Father,

and that through faith in Christ we are now reconciled to the Father.

And so, our Lord in our text has made it plain that He cannot deny Himself as the only Savior. In doing so it would make Him a liar which God cannot be. But Jesus drives home the point that though He cannot lie these Jews have continued to lie about their true spiritual condition, as well as lying about the very ministry of Jesus.

But if they cannot believe that the Father confirms the glory of Jesus, maybe they'll believe Abraham. What if Abraham could confirm that Jesus is who He says He is?

JOH 8:56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

Well, this certainly seems a pompous thing to say. You would have to have been around when Abraham lived to make such a claim which means that you were greater than Abraham to the degree that you are at least 2,000 years old, which is how far they are separated from the death of Abraham.

Again, these Jews were not considering the spiritual implications of this statement which we'll look at next, but instead they were only thinking of the absurdity of our Lord's claim as they were looking at a man who was obviously not even fifty years old (Verse 57). And if Jesus is saying that He's at least 2,000 years old then He has aged very gracefully.

Now, this is not to say that these Jews even entertained the idea that Jesus could have been around that long, but they were pointing this out to bolster their case that Jesus had to be out of His mind.

But I want us to look at the statement Jesus makes in verse fifty six because it is very instructive about our Lord's deity.

JOH 8:56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

Now, the question you and I might have is, in what sense did Abraham see the day of Jesus Christ, and then rejoice in seeing it?

There are at least a few ways in which Abraham saw the day of Jesus. And notice that it doesn't say that he saw Jesus but only that he saw the day of Jesus.

A.W. Pink in his commentary on John suggests that the first way in which Abraham saw the day of Jesus was by faith in the promises of God.

HEB 11:8-10 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

The second way in which Abraham saw the day of Christ was obviously by faith in the God who promises in specific ways. In other words, Abraham understood the messianic mission of God as the Lord would send a Savior into the world to take our place for sin.

One place in which we get a glimpse into Abraham's understanding of this is when he offered up Isaac, his son, to God.

GEN 22:7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

We know that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, but we also know that God stopped him just before he was about to take his son's life.

GEN 22:12-14 "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." 13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

By faith, Abraham saw the day of the Lord Jesus as he saw how the burnt offering sacrifice would take the place of Abraham's son, and by implication, all men. But he also had the faith that enabled him to understand that God is faithful to His promise to multiply his offspring even if he did take Isaac's life.

Hebrews 11:17-19 ¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten *son*; ¹⁸ *it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED."* ¹⁹ *He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead*, from which he also received him back as a type.

A third way that the Lord may have revealed the day of Christ to Abraham, according to Pink, is in special revelation. Our Lord may very well have revealed certain specific things to Abraham about the Christ. And David seems to allude to this in the Psalms.

PSA 25:14 The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.

We know for example that even Isaiah understood these things about Jesus Christ as John points out later in this gospel.

JOH 12:40-41 "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn - and I would heal them." 41 *Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.*

And so, we have at least three ways in which Abraham saw and rejoiced in the day of Jesus. But I don't believe that any of these explanations adequately address the age argument from the Jews that Jesus was not even 50 years old in relationship to Abraham seeing the day of Christ, especially as they now desire to kill Him as a heretic in light of His response.

This is why I believe we cannot discount how Abraham literally saw Jesus and understood that the day of our Lord was being played out in his very presence.

Early on in Abraham's walk with the Lord we see this as the Lord approaches the camp of Abraham with two other men.

GEN 18:1-2 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. 2 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

Abraham would spend the day with these three men and have dinner with them before two of them left while the third stayed behind.

GEN 18:16-19 When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. 17 Then the LORD [Jehovah] said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? 18 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD [Jehovah] by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD [Jehovah] will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

We know that the two who left were angels, while the third who stayed and told Abraham what He was about to do, in destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, was none other than Jehovah, whom we know is the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ.

Abraham literally saw the day of Christ in this encounter as he understood that Christ was God, and a deliverer of those who belonged to Him as we see in Him delivering Lot and his family from destruction.

This is what Jesus meant when He told the Jews in our text that Abraham longed to see His day and saw it and rejoiced. In other words, Jesus was saying that He was personally there with Abraham as the Lord God and the Giver of the promise of eternal life.

The Jews could not accept any of this and so they scoff at our Lord in verse 57. But Jesus responds in such a way as to take away any doubt that He is the God of Abraham.

JOH 8:58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

The first thing Jesus says is, "I tell you the truth..." In the Greek this is much more emphatic as some of your translations put it, "Verily, verily, or truly, truly I say to you."

Jesus was emphasizing the fact that His statement is of such importance that He prefaces it with the declaration that what I'm about to tell you is the truth which cannot be challenged.

And the truth that Jesus is about to give them will verify that He is none other than the God who came into this world to redeem sinful men.

"Before Abraham was born, I am!"

Two things are being stated here. The first is that Abraham had a beginning. He was born and lived at a specific time in history. The second thing which Jesus is stating here is that He had no beginning.

Before the beginning of Abraham, I am; not, I was. In other words, before Abraham was born into this world Jesus Christ had been in existence from eternity. The words, "I am" are a deliberate recognition of the deity of Jesus Christ.

You'll remember that this is the same set of words God used of Himself to describe to Moses who He was, as he spoke to Moses from the burning bush.

EXO 3:13-15 Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, '*What is his name?*' Then what shall I tell them? 14 *God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I Am has sent me to you.'"* 15 God also said to Moses, "*Say to the Israelites, '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, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.*

It is this name, *I am*, in the generation of these Jews whom Jesus is speaking to, that Jesus claims for Himself, as the eternal God. In describing Himself in our text as I am, Jesus is placing Himself not only at the time of Abraham, but also at the time of Moses as He describes Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

There is no doubt what Jesus is claiming, which is precisely why the Jews respond the way they do.

JOH 8:59 At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

They picked up stones to stone him because they viewed Him as a blasphemer of God.

LEV 24:16 anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death.

But Jesus is not just anyone. He is God. And as such He must make this claim. But just as important He is not claiming any glory for Himself at this time because it is the Father in heaven who has

conferred on Him the glory that is due Him as Jesus does the work and will of the Father as He proves it with signs and wonders.

He wasn't making a false claim worthy of death. He was stating the truth so that these people might not taste death. How merciful and gracious is our Savior.

And yet, these people wanted to put Him to death. This, says Jesus, Abraham would never have done. It's amazing, as John Calvin notes in his commentary on John, that Abraham longed to see Christ's day and saw it and was glad. He places these words in the mouth of Jesus who is speaking to these Jews; "[Abraham] desired me when I was absent, you spurn Me when I am present."

What an indictment and yet how true. And now, after the fact; after Jesus has gone to the cross and died for our sins and rose bodily from the grave, proving Himself to be the Son of God with power, people still scoff and make excuses for not embracing Him as Lord and Savior.

And yet, we must never give up in sharing the truth in love if they're willing to listen. May we join with Abraham and the prophets of old as we declare that we have rejoiced in seeing the day of Jesus and now we long for that day when we will see Him face to face.

Peter spoke of those OT prophets and the part they played in revealing Christ.

1PE 1:10-13 Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11 trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. 12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. 13 Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

And may we join with the apostle Paul who longed for Christ to come for us on the last day when death is finally swallowed up in victory and we rise bodily to join Him on the new earth in glory.

1TH 4:16-18 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage each other with these words.