

The Great I Am – John 8:48-59

I'm eager to get back to our study of John, so turn with me to John 8:48-59.

We're studying the book of John that we may believe and live. That's the purpose of the entire book.— *That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20:31, ESV) Believe and live. Believe and keep believing. That's the purpose.

And this passage is no different. It's the final interaction Jesus has while in the temple for the Feast of Tabernacles, and in it we find five concluding thoughts. Not the least of which is Jesus' sudden proclamation as The Great I Am. Let's take a look.

After he just told the crowd that their father is the devil and they can't handle the truth — *The Jews answered him* [v48], "*Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?*" "Are we not right in saying you're a low-life half-breed and a heretic?" That's the idea.

Samaritan was a *racial* slur, and demonic a *religious* one. A personal attack on the messenger because they were mad, and couldn't refute the message.

It's something *we* should expect as well. If they call the master of the house such things, *how much more will they malign those of his household?* Matthew 10:25.

[49] *Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father"* ["I might seem crazy to you, but I'm not. I'm just saying and doing what *God* wants. I live for him. I honor him."], *and* [then he says] *you dishonor me.*" You think? Demonic half-breed?

[50] "*Yet I do not seek my own glory* [I don't live to promote myself]; *there is One who seeks it* [there *is* one who glorifies me; *the One*], *and he is the judge.*" In other words, "What he says goes. What he says matters. Not you. So think what you want and call me what you will," Jesus is saying, "it's not true. And the One who *knows* it, is the only one who matters. Because he's the judge."

It's a subtle reminder to live for God and God alone.

A SUBTLE REMINDER: Live for the One whose judgement matters (v48-50)

That's the first thought. Live for the One whose opinion matters most. The One whose *perspective* matters most. The One whose decisions and thoughts are perfect and pure. Now, does that mean the thoughts of those *around* us don't matter? Is this a license to be a lone ranger? Obviously not. God often *puts* people in our life to *convey* his thoughts. His people.

But the thoughts and judgment of those who *don't* know him, like the Jews in front of Jesus, pale in comparison. The *world's* thoughts, the world's view of you, doesn't really matter. Good *or* bad.

If the whole world thinks you're awesome, but God doesn't, it doesn't matter. You're on thin ice. Nor does it matter if the world thinks you're wacko. Or out of touch. Or an over-the-top Jesus freak.

Only God's thoughts matter. Only his judgement. And if you believe in his Son, having repented of your sin, he thinks you're precious. He considers you his child. His own. His family. Never to leave you, and always to love you.

So whatever you do, live for *him*. Honor *him*. Just like Jesus. That's the first thought we find here.

The second comes from v51. After responding to their attack, Jesus immediately returns to the *issue*; the drum he's been pounding all along. That believing in who he is and what he says, is the key to life. Now and forever. Only this time, his statement is so fantastic, and so extreme, it's almost unbelievable.

[51] "*Truly, truly, I say to you* [notice the emphasis; the certainty], *if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.*" What! They must have been dumbfounded. Incredulous. And they certainly refused to believe it. Just like many today. Who won't even consider it.

But for those who do, for those who accept it at face value, it's . . .

A GLORIOUS PROMISE: Those who believe and practice God's Word will never die (v51)

How good is that? How amazing? How comforting? Reassuring. Hope-filling. Fueling. If you keep the words of Jesus, if you believe and follow what he says as found in the Bible, God's Word; if you embrace and treasure what he commands, including an utter reliance on his grace and mercy when you fail; if you believe and practice what he conveys — about himself, and faith, and repentance, and salvation — you'll *never* see death. Never even *taste* it as the next verse says.

But wait a minute. Believers die all the time. I've seen it, you've seen it, we've all seen it. Some of you recently, in the loss of a loved one. What do you mean they *never see death*? The Jews even cite Abraham and the prophets as dying. Exhibit A. And Jesus himself says in chapter 11 — *Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.* (John 11:25) Sure does sound like we see and taste death.

So what is this? Some sort of spiritual mumbo-jumbo that doesn't make any sense? Some sort of religious make-believe that requires us to check our brains at the door? Not at all.

It's a glorious promise to say that those who keep the Word of *God* will **never cease to exist**. Because death doesn't *mean* cease to exist. Not according to the Bible. When we breath our last, our *bodies* die, but our souls continue. We die physically, but not spiritually. Spiritually, we continue on. Every single one of us.

But there's a big difference between believers and unbelievers. Believers, *keepers* of God's Word, pass immediately into the presence of God; in heaven. We go from life to Life. Small l to capital L. No longer seeing Jesus dimly, but face to face. Which means we **always live with Christ**. Whether here or there (heaven). Those who believe and practice God's Word, always live with Christ.

Unbelievers on the other hand, immediately go to hell when they die. To suffer in eternal torment *apart* from Christ. The exact *opposite* of believers. Something believers *never* experience. If you believe and practice all that Jesus says, you'll **never suffer in hell**.

That's the *death* to which Jesus refers in v51. Those who keep his word will never suffer the misery, separation, weeping, and darkness of hell.

What a glorious promise. What a life-*changing* promise. Literally. Our outlook, and demeanor, and confidence, and boldness, and everything else, should be radically different than those who don't believe. We should be the most joyful, free, and courageous people on the face of the earth. The most faithful, loving, and generous people around. The most hopeful, worshipful, and thankful. We're never going to die!

The third thought, from v52-53, is textbook. [52] *The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! [Now we know you're crazy.] Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.'* [In other words, "Our forefathers kept God's word and they're dead as a doornail.] [53] *Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died!* [They repeat themselves. You can almost *hear* the exasperation.] *Who do you make yourself out to be?"*

"Who do you think you are? If you're really speaking words from God (40), if you're really speaking of what you saw and heard from him, how is it you can say such a thing? Because Abraham and the prophets heard from him, and they *never* said anything like this.

It's . . .

A TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE: Preconceived notions will keep you from the truth (v52-53)

That's the third thought. Preconceived notions about God and his work, God and his ways, will keep you from the *truth* about God. The truth of what he says, and promises, and does. The Jews were a textbook example.

They were so fixated on the past, they couldn't see the present. So obsessed with their forefathers, they couldn't fathom someone greater. So set on the Old Covenant, they rejected the New. So obsessed with the temple, they missed the church. So caught up in their notions of an earthly kingdom, centered in Israel, they couldn't imagine a global one centered on Christ. Their preconceived notions kept them from the truth. Even causing them to oppose it.

Same for today. The textbook remains. If you have a preconceived notion that God is only loving and never just, you'll never accept the truth of hell. If you have a preconceived notion that people are good, you'll never agree that none are righteous and need forgiven. If you think all religions lead to God, you'll never embrace Jesus; because he says otherwise. And if you think this book is written by men alone, you'll miss the only truth that matters.

It's a textbook example that preconceived notions about God, will keep you from God. That's the third thought.

The fourth, is found in Jesus' response. [54] *Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing.*

They had just asked, rhetorically, "*Who do you make yourself out to be?*" And Jesus basically says, "I'm not trying to be anybody. Self-generated glory is useless. Nothing."

What a commentary on social media. Where people do everything they *can* to glorify themselves. "Look at me! Aren't I great?"

No. No you're not. And you shouldn't be trying. If Jesus didn't do it, if he didn't glorify himself, having every *right* to do so, we definitely shouldn't.

Then he says – [54b] *It is my Father who glorifies me* [just like he said in v50], *of whom you say, 'He is our God.'* In other words, "You shouldn't have to ask who I am, you should know. Because you claim to know the one who *glorifies* me."

[55] *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,* [Wow. The rebukes keep coming. "You can't handle the truth, your father's the devil, and you're a liar." If you think Jesus was all rainbows and butterflies, you haven't read the Bible.]

[55b] *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.* Two things that go hand-in-hand. If you truly know God, you keep his word. Because having tasted and seen, you can do no other. He's awesome.

But the primary thought here is . . .

A CLEAR WARNING: Knowing about God doesn't mean you know God (v54-55)

"You say you know God," Jesus says, "but you don't, v55. You say, '*He is our God,*' v54, but he's not. You just know *about* him." That's the implication.

But it's also the *indication* of the two Greek words that John uses for "know." Both in v55. The first is "**ginōskō**." Which conveys a knowledge based on experience. So when Jesus said, "*you have not known him,*" ginosko, he was saying, "you have no knowledge of God based on experience; based on a relationship. It's information-based only. You don't know him personally."

But when Jesus said, "*I know him,*" the word is "**oīda**." A different word for "know." Which conveys an instinctive perception of fact. As if to say, "I'm intimately familiar with God. I know him in my heart and soul. He's near and dear to me. There's a relationship *and* an eternity of experience." I "oīda" him.

All that to say, it's not what you know, it's who you know. And how you know. Knowing *about* God, like the Jews in front of Jesus, counts for nothing. Knowing some facts, or verses, or theology, doesn't mean you know *him*.

Make sure you *know* God. Make sure you talk with him and spend time with him. Make sure this isn't an exercise in information gathering. It's a clear warning.

And last, the pinnacle of this interaction, is the revelation Jesus makes in v56-59.

Going back to their appeal to Abraham, Jesus said – [56] *Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.*" Which might refer to a prophetic sense Abraham had, based on the promise that his offspring would bless the nations; or, it could refer to the example of Isaac as a *foreshadowing* of Christ. (Genesis 21-22)

Because like Jesus, Isaac was miraculously born. And like Jesus, he completely trusted his father. And was offered as a sacrifice. And delivered from death. (Hebrews 11:19) The parallels are striking.

Either way, Abraham foresaw the day of Jesus, saw his time, *and was glad*. I bet.

[57] *So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old [adding plenty of years to his age to emphasize their point], and have you seen Abraham?”* [Who lived 2000 years ago?] [58] *Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you [there it is again; the emphasis of certainty], before Abraham was [before Abraham lived], I am.”* Not “before Abraham was, I was; but before Abraham was, I am.” Very important.

[59] *So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.* (ESV) Stones, because what he said is a claim of divinity. A claim of deity. And the Jews, thinking it was heretical, tried to stone him to death. The *penalty* for such a claim under the Law. (Lev 24:16; Dt 13:6-11; Lev 17:2-7)

But his statement reveals . . .

A DIVINE TRUTH: Jesus is God (v56-59)

When Jesus said, “*before Abraham was, I am,*” he was invoking the very words of God that he spoke to Moses at the burning bush. **Exodus 3:13-14.**

When God called Moses to return to Egypt and lead his people out – [13] *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?”* [14] *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.’”* I Am.

It's a two-word phrase that's a form of the name Yahweh, God's proper name. I AM WHO I AM, I AM, and YHWH are all grammatically related. And the verb form, I AM, makes the meaning exceedingly hard to nail down. Because it's like saying, “Tell them ‘an active verb’ sent you. ‘I was, I am, and I always will be’ sent you. The all-sufficient and ever-present one sent you. The unchanging and eternal one. Divine and holy one. All of that, is all wrapped up and conveyed, in the words, “*I AM.*”

Here's a little acronym to remember it. S.I.D.E. Self-sufficient, immutable, divine, and eternal. *I Am* means he's **Self-sufficient** – he exists without any help or influence outside himself. Second, *I Am* means he's **Immutable** – unchanging; the same yesterday, today, and forever. D, *I Am* means he's **Divine** – because only God could *be* such things. And E, he's **Eternal** – continually existing from eternity past to eternity future. S.I.D.E. Four words to capture the meaning of *I Am*.

And here's the issue. It's a label that was long recognized and revered as a title and name of God. So when Jesus used it for himself, he was claiming to *be* God. Same attributes and same essence. “I've seen Abraham,” he said, “because I'm God. The Great I Am.”

No wonder Paul could say – *In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.* (Col 2:9) No wonder Jesus himself could make such a glorious promise of life. No wonder mountains shake and demons run at the mention of his name. No wonder no one can stand in his presence, and no power of hell *withstand* his presence.

Jesus is God. God in the flesh. The second person of the Trinity. A divine truth, that we may believe and live.

Prayer – Oh God, use these thoughts, from the reminder and promise to the example and warning, to change our mind and shape our heart. Use them to make us more and more like Jesus. The Great I Am. In whose name we pray, amen.

You Are Loved