

## 17. The Light Challenges the Darkness

John 8:31-59

The Gospel According to John

### Holding onto His Word

We are continuing to meditate on Jesus' words to those in the temple courts on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. In our last study, we read the words of Jesus saying that He is the Light of the World (John 8:12). It is possible that this statement of Jesus was spoken as a second ceremony began called the Illumination of the Temple. As darkness began to descend, young men climbed up the ladders of the four large candelabra's and filled them with fresh oil before setting light to each one. These huge candelabras bathed the whole area with light. Jesus stated that He was and is *the* light of the world, and not just *a* light. This statement was understood by the Jewish leadership as Jesus claiming to be God, and rightly so, for so He is. Verse 30 tells us that many who were listening put their faith in Him after hearing His gracious words. Believing in Him does not mean that they were all believers, but that they were greatly impressed by His patient attitude toward those who were heatedly attacking Him. The Lord's words brought fresh anger among the Jewish leaders. How could He, a mere man, be God? To the thousands in attendance, He then turned to them with words of instruction about following His teaching.

<sup>31</sup>To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup>Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32)

Question 1) To what is Jesus referring when He talks about knowing the truth that will set people free? (Verse 31). What do you think He means by the word "truth?"

In this passage, the Lord makes it very clear that disciples are those who hold to His teaching. We are not to be mere converts; we are called to be disciples, a word that means a learner and follower in the footsteps of the One from whom we are learning. This desire to learn about Jesus is a mark of a genuine disciple of Messiah: "You are really my disciples." In our day, many want to be disciples but ignore the teaching of Jesus and have no time to meditate (think deeply) on His words or works. If we are to be followers of Christ, we will hold fast to His teaching by modeling our lives by following His Word. Just as we need food daily, we also need daily spiritual food, i.e., the Word of God.□

Author A.W. Pink has some interesting words about holding or continuing in Messiah's teaching:

Continuance in His word is not a condition of discipleship. Instead, it is the *manifestation* of it. It is this, among other things, which distinguishes a true disciple from one who is a mere professor. These words of Christ supply us with a particular test. It is not how a man begins, but how he continues and ends. It is this which distinguishes the stony ground hearer from the good ground hearer (Matthew 13:20-23).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, Published by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1945. Page 446.

Jesus then said, “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (v. 32). Knowing the truth will set us free. The Greek term translated “set you free” suggests being released from indentured servanthood. In the ancient world, when a person didn't have enough money to pay his debts, either he or one of his children was made a slave or servant to the one owed. If someone paid his or her debt, they were released from indentured servanthood, i.e., set free. The truth is that Jesus has paid the sin debt that humanity owed and liberated people from slavery to Satan. The Lord was saying that, if they listened and held to His teaching, then they would know the truth about God's deliverance from sin, and that truth would keep them in life and set them free from slavery to the power of sin.

### Slaves to Sin

Fearing that the ordinary people were listening to Him, the religious leaders could not contain themselves. To be told that they could be made free implied that, before they know the truth that Christ was speaking, they were slaves. To a man without the Spirit of God, such words hurt their religious pride and made them bristle within:

<sup>33</sup>They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" <sup>34</sup>Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup>Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. <sup>36</sup>So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. <sup>37</sup>I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word (John 8:33-36).

What a terrible indictment of a person! May it never be said of anyone reading these words, “You are ready to kill me because you have no room for my word” (v. 36). I trust that all of you value highly these words of eternal life that are spoken by the Lord Jesus. When we find room in our hearts for His Word, it will bring illumination into our lives, exposing and challenging any darkness that has been there. As usual, the religious elite failed to understand that Messiah was not talking about things on the physical level, but in spiritual terms when He said that they could be set free from slavery. They went off on a tangent about the Jewish people never being slaves to anyone, which was completely untrue, Egypt had enslaved them before Moses came along; Babylon also conquered them, and at that very time, they were under subjugation by Rome. Jesus homed in on their hearts, saying, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin” (v. 34). He meant that sin has an addictive power over us that refuses to release us once it gets its hooks into us. Let me illustrate what I say with a story from my past.

When I was seventeen years of age and very insecure and impressionable, I began working on a cruise liner with about 200 people on the crew. We cruised to Norway, Denmark, France, Spain, Gibraltar, and to the North African ports of Tangiers and Casablanca in Morocco. While on one of the cruises to North Africa, I wanted to become part of the in-crowd and enjoyed hanging out and drinking with the other young men. One evening, a marijuana cigarette was passed around. I took it and thought that I would try it and see how it would make me feel. After a few puffs, I passed it on. I didn't notice that I felt any different, but I was tempted to feel like I had become part of the in-crowd of the crew. I was warned by my grandma never to take drugs and was fearful of the consequences, but sin also has a deceiving aspect to it. I quieted my conscience by telling myself that the marijuana didn't affect me for some reason.

I thought I could control the drug, but before I knew it, the drug and the lifestyle, which went with it, was controlling me. From that point on, my life took a downward direction into real bondage to marijuana, lasting around nine years of my life. I lost all self-esteem and couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror. Every time I did, I saw someone I no longer recognized. I tried to break the habit several times by throwing the marijuana into the sea, but I just went back and bought more the next day. It had a real hold on me and ruled over everything I did. My enslavement was broken at the feet of Jesus when I gave my life to Him. From that point on, I have not touched any marijuana or any other drug. The Lord entirely delivered me from that bondage. Jesus said, **“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (v. 36).**

I hope that you have not gone down that road and that it is different for you, but the chances are that many reading these words have been or are addicted to alcohol, lying, cheating, or stealing. Your sin may not be as apparent as those things, but what about bad temper, envy, arrogance, lust, pornography, sexual immorality, slander, gossip, covetousness, pride, slander or even fear, e.g., fear of death, fear of a parent, fear of your boss? All of these things have an addictive, enslaving power over us, along with all the guilt and other emotions that come with them, but God's power will help us to overcome. We can be free.

A workman on a road construction crew told this story of a time when he was working on a project deep in the mountain area of Pennsylvania. Every morning as he drove to work in his pickup, he would see a young boy at a fishing hole near the road. He would wave and speak to the boy each day. One day, however, as he drove slowly past the fishing spot and asked how the boy was doing, he got a strange reply: “The fish aren't biting today, but the worms sure are.” When he pulled into the local gas station down the road a few minutes later, he jokingly related the boy's comment to the attendant. For a moment the man laughed, but then a look of horror crossed his face, and without another word, he ran to his truck, jumped in, and drove hurriedly away. Later that day, the man on the construction crew found out what had happened. The man at the gas station had arrived on the scene too late to save the boy, who had somehow mistaken a nest of baby rattlesnakes for earthworms and bitten to death. Baby rattlesnakes, you see, are born with their full venom. And so it is with many of the sins that tempt us. They may appear harmless in the beginning, yet they contain Satan's poison and will destroy us if we handle them.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences of sin are often hidden from us by the tempter; it is only later that the full bite of sin takes effect in our lives. Are you tired of carrying your sin? Bring them to the foot of the cross, for Christ offers you freedom.

Question 2) Have you witnessed an instance where people have been enslaved to a habit they could not control? (No names, please.) How did it affect their lives, and were they able to break free? Try to keep this brief.

### **The Children of the Devil**

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<sup>2</sup> 1500 illustrations for Biblical Preaching, edited by Michael Green, Published by Baker Book House, Page 338.

There is a general philosophy in our day that God is the Father of all humankind. In a certain sense the statement is true, for He created our physical bodies and gave us a spirit, mind, will, and emotions, but it is not true that He is our Father until we are born again (John 3:3). Jesus said that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who are on His side, and those who belong to the devil and are deceived by him, and do his work:

He who is **not with me is against me**, and he who does not gather with me scatters (Matthew 12:30).

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live **when you followed the ways of this world** and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, **the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient** (Ephesians 2:1-2).

The Lord now informed the religious elite that, just because they could count themselves as descendants of Abraham, this did not make them children of Abraham, the man of faith. Christ sought to draw them from the shackles of the enemy by telling them the truth of their spiritual condition: □

<sup>38</sup>I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father." <sup>39</sup>"Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did. <sup>40</sup>As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. <sup>41</sup>You are doing the things your own father does." "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. <sup>43</sup>Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. <sup>44</sup>You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. <sup>45</sup>Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! <sup>46</sup>Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? <sup>47</sup>He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God" <sup>48</sup>The Jews answered him, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?" (John 8:38-48).

These men arguing with Jesus were saying that their father was Abraham (v. 39). They now tried character assassination with terrible words of defamation towards His birth and His mother: "**We are not illegitimate children,**" they protested (v. 41). They mentioned their belief that He was born illegitimately and probably was a Samaritan since they had no evidence as to who His father was. Perhaps, they had sent their spies out to Nazareth where Messiah grew up and found out that Mary was carrying Him before her marriage to Joseph, her husband. They said to Him, "**Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?**" (v. 48). If they had checked the records, they would have found out about His very noble birth in Bethlehem, His ancestry of King David, and the tribe of Judah. The enemy loves to defame Christ and damage the reputation of His name, the name above all names, and drag it through the mud. Many of us

experience this day by day. It is not the name of Buddha or Mohamed that is spoken in vain. It is the name of Jesus that is expressed in vain and defamed. □

Jesus told them clearly, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire” (v. 44). Because sin dominated their lives, the outflow of their lives and the words and actions that sprang from them showed that it was Satan who wholly owned them.

**<sup>16</sup>Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? <sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. <sup>18</sup>You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (Romans 6:16-18 Emphasis mine).**

Without thinking about it, many of us do things that our parents habitually did. We, the children, are the image of our parents. If Satan is the owner and operator of our hearts, the outflow and default of our lives will be that of slavery to sin. It is true that, as Christians, we continue to sin, and we won’t be completely free of sin until Jesus comes, but Satan will not continue to rule or dominate us with habitual sin. We need not listen to the old master because sin will no longer rule over us if we have the Spirit of God and walk in obedience to Him (1 John 3:6). There is often a battle within as to which voice we will obey: Christ’s or Satan’s. The fruit of our lives will tell others as to who has gained our allegiance, Satan or God. The worst part is that many times, we cannot see ourselves as other people see us, for sin can be so deceptive. There is a spiritual opposition by the enemy toward believers in Christ walking in humble obedience.

Christ was faithful to tell them exactly what He saw, “You belong to your father, the devil” (v. 44). Sometimes, the truth must be spoken so that we may awaken people from the slumber of spiritual death. There are those who suggest that we should not say hard things and hurt people’s feelings about their sins to awaken them to their spiritual condition. I do not agree. We are responsible for telling the truth of the Scriptures. We are in a battle, and lives are at stake. If Jesus spoke plainly about where He saw these religious elite heading, then so should we to those around us.

Question 3) Who are you most like in your family? Name some mannerism or trait that you do that's the same as one of your relatives. Share a characteristic, attribute, or quality of yours that you see one of your kids doing. □

## The Great I Am

<sup>49</sup>“I am not possessed by a demon,” said Jesus, “but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. <sup>50</sup>I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. <sup>51</sup>Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death.” <sup>52</sup>At this they exclaimed, “Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. <sup>53</sup>Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” <sup>54</sup>Jesus replied, “If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you

claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. <sup>55</sup>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 obey his word. <sup>56</sup>Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” <sup>57</sup>“You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!” <sup>58</sup>“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” <sup>59</sup>At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds (John 8:49-59).

God is not willing that any should perish but wants everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9), so Jesus tried one more time to reach them in the hope that they would listen to His Word. He said to them, “I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” (v. 51). Instead, He is shut down with scorn that comes from the heart of those whom the enemy loves to use. “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. Are you greater than our father Abraham? Who do you think you are? (Verses 52-53).

Jesus replied saying, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (v. 56). Some say that we should interpret this as saying that, when Abraham was alive on earth, he looked forward to the day when His Seed, the Lord Jesus Christ, would be born in Bethlehem (Genesis 26:4). I think it should be interpreted that Abraham in heaven rejoiced along with the angels when the Lord was sent to earth from the right hand of the Father and came to the world as Messiah. When Jesus made this statement, they misunderstood Him again as they were thinking in earthly terms. They reasoned that it would have been impossible for Jesus to have seen Abraham, for Abraham lived and died more than 2000 years earlier. How is it possible that Jesus could have seen Abraham? It was possible because Abraham was not dead, but very much alive! Christ told them that God was not the God of the dead, but of the living:

“I am the God of **Abraham**, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matthew 22:32).

Abraham was very much alive when Christ left heaven to come to earth even though Abraham’s body was long ago returned to dust in his grave. All of us who have placed our trust in Christ will also live even though we die (John 11:25). Jesus then uttered a very profound statement that angered His listeners to the core of their beings. He told them that “before Abraham was born, I am!” (v. 58).

#### Question 4) What got them so angry that they picked up stones to kill Him?

When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, He told Moses that He was being sent to the Israelites in Egypt to deliver them out of the slavery of Egypt. Moses asked God whom he should say was sending him. 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’” (Exodus 3:14).

When Jesus told them that He had seen Abraham, John the Apostle records the scorn of the religious leaders when they thought they had caught Jesus out:

56Your 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!" 59At this,  
they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple  
 grounds (John 8:56-59).

Jesus didn't say, "Before Abraham was born, I was," or "Before Abraham was, I already existed." No, the Lord deliberately used the same name of God spoken to Moses but translated into Greek, *EGO AMI*, the name by which God had revealed Himself to the Israelites, viz. the *Great I Am*. Notice how the Jewish elite responded to the "*I Am*" statement. They took up rocks to stone Him for blasphemy because He was claiming to be God.

This reference to Jesus' being the *Great I Am* is an essential truth for us to understand because of the statement of Christ just a few verses earlier in John 8:24. Jesus said, "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am (the one I claim to be), you will indeed die in your sins" (John 8:24). In most English translations, the words "the one I claim to be" is in parenthesis. Why did the editors put those words in parenthesis? Because it is not in the original text, that's why! It has been added to help us understand the text. It puts a different emphasis on the passage entirely. Jesus is clearly saying that redemption comes as we get a true picture of Who Jesus is—the Divine Son of God, i.e., the great *I Am*. His meaning is clear. Eternal life hinges on an understanding *Who* Jesus is. If He is only a man, then His death would have done nothing for us. However, the fact is that God came to us as the great Deliverer from slavery to sin as God is the only One who could accomplish it. That's why His Name is Jesus, which means *YHWH* saves. The greatest truth we must face is the fact that Messiah is the great "*I AM*," i.e., the way, the truth, and the life. He isn't *a* way; He is The Way, The Truth, and The Life!

### What Does the Name *I Am That I Am* Mean?

"I Am that I Am" (Hebrew: אהיה אשר אהיה, pronounced *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* is a common English translation (King James Bible and others) of the response God used when Moses asked for His name (Exodus 3:14). It is one of the most famous verses in the Old Testament. *Hayah* means "existed" or "was" in Hebrew; "*ehyeh*" is the first person, singular, imperfect form. *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* is generally interpreted to mean "I am that I am," though it translates as "I-shall-be that I-shall-be." Jesus is the pre-existent One, the God of all creation, the divine I Am, the self-existent One that is everything that you need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

How do you need the Great "I Am" to come alongside you today? He is all you need Him to be. Whatever has you in bondage, He wants to set you free. He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). How about it? Why don't you call on Him and lay your burden of sin at His feet?

For those of you that are in groups, why don't you close the group with a time of prayer for your friends and relatives? Pray that God will open their hearts to His Word.

Prayer: Father, thank You for sending Your Son into the world to release us from our slavery to sin. We pray for those we know who are still in pain due to the heavy load of addictions and sin. Please open their hearts to Your love, Lord, Amen!

Keith Thomas

Email: [keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com](mailto:keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com)

Website: [www.groupbiblestudy.com](http://www.groupbiblestudy.com)