



The Gospel of John - Chapter Eight

II. John 1:19-12:50 - The Signs of the Messiah (continues)

II.c John 5:1-10:42 - Mounting Jewish opposition, additional signs (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eight

John 7:53-8:11 is missing from many early manuscripts but is included here as it was accepted by the early church fathers to have been originated by John, perhaps as an oral message to his church. He tells the story of a woman caught in adultery and how the Jews wanted to use her crime to trap Jesus. Her sin would be deserving of death according to the law. If Jesus sided with the woman he could be accused of breaking the law; if he sided with the Jews then he would be accused of having a lack of compassion and countenancing her subsequent death. However, Jesus challenged them by saying the one without sin could be the first to cast a stone at her. Since all are sinners then none of them could throw a stone at her. The crowd left and the woman was forgiven by Jesus with a command to sin no more.

Jesus speaks openly about being the light of the world, which again causes a dispute with the Pharisees, who claim his testimony is false. Jesus counters by stating that, since he comes from God then God validates his testimony, making it true even according to the law.

When Jesus again speaks of going away to a place where they cannot come they believe he is talking about suicide. Jesus warns them that they cannot come unless they believe in him for they will die in their sins. He then speaks of being lifted up, which they cannot understand but is a clear reference to Jesus' death on the Cross.

Jesus states that true disciples believe in his word and are set free. They believe that, as descendants of Abraham, they are already free. Jesus then refers to them as slaves to sin because they do not accept the words of truth that come from God.

The dispute reaches fever pitch when Jesus tells them they are not true descendants of Abraham because they do not act as his true children should act. Jesus says that Abraham had foreseen the coming of the Messiah and was filled with joy because of it, to which the crowd claim that Jesus is demon possessed. Jesus counters by referring to them as the children of the devil, because they want to kill the Son of God rather than accept him. For this the crowd wanted to stone Jesus to death but they were unable to do so.

II.c.vii John 7:53-8:11 - The Woman Caught in Adultery

There is considerable doubt that this story is part of John's original Gospel, for it is absent from all of the oldest manuscripts. However, there is nothing in it unworthy of sound doctrine.

It seems best to view the story as something that probably happened during Jesus' ministry but was not originally part of what John wrote in his Gospel. Therefore it should not be considered as part of Scripture and should not be used as the basis for building any point of doctrine unless confirmed in Scripture.

It is an account in which Jesus shows compassion to a sinful woman and challenges a crowd of Jews to consider their own faults before they pass judgement on those of someone else. The Jews had tried to trap Jesus but he ended up convicting them in their own hearts. After all, sin is sin, and should not be graded into various types, some to be punished and others to be ignored.

[[^{7:53} Then each of them went home, ¹ while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴ they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' ⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' ¹¹ She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.']]

Two key points worthy of comment here are that Jesus always acts out of compassion and that he teaches everyone to examine their own hearts first before trying to examine the actions of others. This is not for the purposes of self-condemnation but provides an opportunity to truly see grace in action.

II.c.viii John 8:12-59 - A Confrontation with the Jewish People

Jesus is still in the city of Jerusalem and finds himself embroiled in a series of confrontations with different groups of people. In referring to himself as the light of the world, Jesus is once again referring to his divine nature and is challenged by the Pharisees, who say he is testifying on his own behalf, something that was not accepted as fact. Jesus refutes their claims by saying that the law requires two witnesses, and what he says is witnessed both by his own testimony and that of his heavenly Father.

Through the use of cryptic comments Jesus makes reference to his own pending death and resurrection, stating again that he is going to a place where those who do not accept him cannot come. Jesus' claims about this being the will of his Father caused some people to believe in him.

Jesus tells the crowd that all true disciples will believe in his words and they will be liberated by them. Their response is that, as children of Abraham, they were already free, but Jesus states this not to be the case since they are slaves to sin.

The crowd continues with their heritage claims to Abraham which Jesus refutes saying they do not behave like children of Abraham should because they flout the law by trying to kill the Son of God. This actually makes them children of the devil and Jesus' charge against them raises their anger to the point where they try to stone him but they are unable to do so.

II.c.iii.1 John 8:12-20 - Jesus the Light of the World

Jesus has dramatically called people to come to him for God's living water (7:37-38) and now he again refers to himself in a most startling way, saying, 'I am the light of the world' (v.12). This claim, like the claim to give living water, also corresponds to events at this festival. A lamp-lighting ceremony took place in the temple every evening of the festival, during which large lamps were set up in the Court of the Women. The lamps' light, it was said, filled every courtyard in the city.

In the light of these lamps there was great singing and dancing all evening in celebration of God's salvation, especially his deliverance at the exodus as he led his people with his presence in a pillar of fire by night. Within the sight of these great lamps in the Court of the Women (v.20), perhaps even in the evening while they blazed, Jesus proclaims himself to be the light of the world.

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'

John 8:12

Jesus is the light of the world fulfilling OT promises of the coming of the light of salvation and the light or presence of God: <<*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*>> (Psalm 27:1), <<*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined*>> (Isaiah 9:2), <<*For so the Lord has commanded us,*

saying, “I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth”>> (Acts 13:47), <<For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true>> (Ephesians 5:8-9), and: <<This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin>> (1 John 1:5-7). Jesus will go on to repeat his claim: <<As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world>> (John 9:5).

This is the second of seven I am sayings recorded in this Gospel. Apart from these sayings there are also several absolute statements where Jesus refers to himself as ‘I am’, in keeping with the reference to God as ‘I am’ in Exodus 3:14.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. Israel followed the presence of the Lord in the pillar of fire as they escaped Egypt and journeyed to the Promised Land: <<The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night>> (Exodus 13:21). Now Jesus gives a promise of salvation much greater than the salvation Israel experienced, for it is deliverance not just from enslavement by a national enemy, but from the forces of rebellion against God that lie behind every form of evil in the world. And this deliverance is not just a rescue from darkness and a glimpse of the light, but an ongoing life apart from darkness through possession of the light of life. The world lies in darkness and death because it has rebelled against God and thus broken contact with the one true source of light and life. Jesus claims to be the light that brings light and life back to the world and sets it free from its bondage to sin. All the salvation that went before, such as the deliverance celebrated at this festival, was a type of this deepest and truest salvation that Jesus now offers.

¹³ Then the Pharisees said to him, ‘You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.’ ¹⁴ Jesus answered, ‘Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.’

John 8:13-14

You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid. The Pharisees do not yet realise the enormity of Jesus’ claims regarding himself, so they do not respond with a charge of blasphemy. Instead, they challenge the form his self-proclamation takes, charging him with bearing witness to himself and therefore lacking sufficient witnesses. The need for two or three witnesses is laid down in the law: <<A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained>>

(Deuteronomy 19:15), and the later tradition, reflected here, said that ‘none may be believed when he testifies of himself’ (Mishnah Ketubot 2:9).

Jesus says his testimony is valid, Greek *alethes* means true, because he knows where he has come from and where he is going, even though they do not. That is, he really does know the truth about himself because he knows the Father and is conscious of his relationship to the Father. They cannot see this truth about him because they are judging by human standards (v.15). Their judgment is limited to the human sphere and breaks down when applied to anything which puts this sphere in question.

¹⁵ You judge by human standards; I judge no one.

John 8:15

You judge by human standards is the Greek phrase *kata ten sarka* and means according to the flesh; that is, according to the natural understanding and human standards of this world.

When Jesus says I judge no one, he means that during his earthly ministry he did not come as judge of the world but as its Saviour: <<*I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world*>> (John 12:47). However, Jesus’ coming does itself provide a basis for division and thus judgment in another sense: <<*Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind’*>> (John 9:39), and at a later time Jesus will come to judge the entire world: <<*The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge*>> (John 12:48). In yet another sense, where judge means rightly evaluate, Jesus does judge events and people throughout his earthly ministry: <<*I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me*>> (John 5:30).

¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. ¹⁷ In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. ¹⁸ I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.’ ¹⁹ Then they said to him, ‘Where is your Father?’ Jesus answered, ‘You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.’

John 8:16-19

Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid. Jesus judges simply by revealing the truth and pointing out one’s distance from that truth. His judgement is flawless because it is God’s judgement, since he does not judge on his own - for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.

In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. Jesus confirms that the law is valid and that he abides by the law because both he and

the Father give testimony, I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf, thereby fulfilling the requirements of the law.

When the Pharisees ask 'where is your Father?', they reveal that they do not realise Jesus is talking about God. It is as if they want to locate his father so they can interrogate him, as they will the parents of the blind man in the next chapter. It would not do them much good, since those who are not open to God cannot hear him even when he speaks directly to them: <<*Father, glorify your name.'* Then a voice came from heaven, *'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'* The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, *'An angel has spoken to him.'* Jesus answered, *'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine'*>> (John 12:28-30). They do not realise that in Jesus they are seeing the clearest revelation of the Father himself. To know Jesus is to know God; such is the core proclamation of this Gospel.

You know neither me nor my Father. The Pharisees have determined Jesus is in error, and they have condemned him in the sense of writing him off. Jesus, on the other hand, has determined they are in error and has shown that they are culpable for their rejection of him and for the alienation from God which lies behind this rejection. However, he has not condemned them in the sense of dismissing them, for he still bears witness to them, offering them revelation and thereby offering them salvation.

If you knew me, you would know my Father also. Jesus here reveals more than just a Father-Son relationship but indicates the true oneness of God and his Christ: <<*Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?'>> (John 14:9), and: <<The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me>> (John 17:22-23).*

²⁰ He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

John 8:20

The treasury of the temple as a structure is mentioned by Josephus in Jewish Antiquities 19.294 and Jewish War 6.282, and was probably located adjacent to the Court of the Women. This would have been where the poor widow made her offering: <<*He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on'*>> (Mark 12:41-44). The NT occurrences of this Greek term may indicate either a collection box for the treasury or the treasury structure itself. Furthermore, the Greek preposition *en*,

translated as in the treasury, can mean ‘in the vicinity of’, i.e. at or by; thus it need not be assumed that Jesus and his disciples had access to the secured halls that stored the immense wealth of the temple.



The Court of the Women is the portico area just in front of and to the left of the main steps that lead into the Temple itself.

No one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. Once again, as if protected by supernatural forces, no one could take Jesus into custody until God’s providential plan was fulfilled and his timetable met.

II.c.iii.2 John 8:21-30 - Jesus Foretells His Death

Jesus again states that he is going away to a place where they cannot come. By saying that he is from above and that they are from below, and that the Son of Man is to be lifted up, Jesus is clearly speaking of his death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, although this can only be truly known after the facts. Those who choose not to believe in Jesus cannot be reconciled to God, will die in their sins and will not be able to join Jesus in the age to come.

²¹ Again he said to them, ‘I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.’

John 8:21

Where I am going refers to heaven, in the presence of the Father, and you cannot come could be taken either to mean that those who would not accept Jesus would never be allowed to enter heaven, or that it was not yet time for believers to join Jesus in heaven with his Father.

You will die in your sin. By rejecting Jesus as the Christ, the Pharisees are rejecting God himself and cannot find reconciliation with God unless they accept the teaching of Jesus. Jesus has given them due warning and cannot be held responsible for their final outcome: *<<If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die’, and you give them no warning, and do not speak to warn the wicked from their wicked way, in order to save their life, those wicked persons shall die for their iniquity; but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and they do not turn from their wickedness, or from their wicked way, they shall die for their iniquity; but you will have saved your life>>* (Ezekiel 3:18-19).

²² Then the Jews said, ‘Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, “Where I am going, you cannot come”?’ ²³ He said to them, ‘You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.’

John 8:22-23

Is he going to kill himself? They speculate that Jesus may be contemplating suicide. According to Josephus, the Jews viewed suicide as consigning a person to ‘the darker regions of the nether world’ because it was a crime ‘hateful to God’ as an act of ‘impiety toward our creator’ (Jewish Wars 3.375-79). So when Jesus says they will die in their sins because they cannot go where he is going (v.21), they think he is saying that he himself will die in a sinful way. Their interpretation of his words shows that either they are missing entirely what he is saying or they are hardheartedly rejecting his message. This reference to suicide ironically applies to them, for there is a sense in which their unbelief is suicide in that they are choosing to reject his offer of the light of life.

You are from below means they belong to this natural world; I am from above means that Jesus originated in and came down from heaven, from God the Father, following his will and speaking his truth. Similarly, Jesus uses the phrase you are of this world, I am not of this world, which appear in similar statements elsewhere: *<<The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all>>* (John 3:31), and: *<<I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world>>* (John 17:14).

24 I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.'

John 8:24

I am he at one level may simply mean 'I am the Messiah' or the one sent by the Father, or perhaps, in view of v.12, 'I am the light of the world'. The Greek phrase *egō eimi* simply means 'I am' and is used in an ordinary sense in 9:9 by a man Jesus healed. However, John is fond of using words with a double meaning and this verse is one of several that hint at a connection with God's statement to Moses in Exodus 3:14, <<*I am who I am*>>, which is *egō eimi* in the Septuagint.

25 They said to him, 'Who are you?' Jesus said to them, 'Why do I speak to you at all? 26 I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.' 27 They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father.

John 8:25-27

Who are you? Jesus' lucid statement leads them to ask the right question. Jesus does not respond with a fresh statement right away, although he will do so in what follows immediately in vv.28-29, but instead points them back to what he has already told them. This question, after all, has been raised throughout this festival. They are viewing him according to human standards (v.15), so he makes no sense to them. Until they are willing to open themselves to his message, understand that he was speaking to them about the Father, and accept him on his own terms, they will make no headway.

Why do I speak to you at all? This could be a rhetorical question as Jesus did not wait for a response or simply exasperation because they fail to comprehend what he is telling them. Yet Jesus always takes the time to explain to all people the will of his Father and the gift of salvation that is being offered. The responsibility then lies with the hearer whether to accept or reject the offer. Yet these men should have needed no persuading for: <<*Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse*>> (Romans 1:20).

I have much to say about you and much to condemn. This judgment is not just Jesus' own assessment. Here, as always, he is passing on what he has heard from the Father, who is himself reliable and true: <<*Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, 'You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him*>> (John 7:28). He pronounces his judgment in what follows in this chapter.

28 So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.'

John 8:28

When you have lifted up the Son of Man. This cryptic saying would not have made much sense to his audience at the time but only becomes clear in light of Jesus' death on the Cross, which was lifted up into an upright position only after Jesus had been nailed to it.

Then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own. The Son of Man's death at their own hands, i.e. when you have lifted up, will reveal both his unique identification with the Father and his dependence on the Father as one distinct from the Father. They may be confused now, but they will know then. Whether this knowledge will result in salvation or judgment is not said. The idea is probably that they will at that point see the revelation shining at its brightest and have their hearts revealed as, in the light of that revelation, they either embrace or reject Christ and the God he reveals.

I speak these things as the Father instructed me is a further indication of Jesus as being distinct from and reliant on the Father: <<*Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me*>> (John 14:24). It also indicates God the Father's authority within the Godhead.

²⁹ And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.'

John 8:29

This verse affirms not only Jesus' lack and avoidance of sin but also that he is always doing positive things that are pleasing to God: <<*The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards*>> (Isaiah 50:5).

The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone. Jesus shows that the Father is ever present with Jesus, always was and always will be. God did not forsake Jesus even on the Cross despite what is written: <<*At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*>> (Mark 15:34). Yes the Cross was a very lonely place and he had to give up his spirit, but this cry comes from Psalm 22, which ends up triumphantly, just as Jesus' death on the Cross would.

³⁰ As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

John 8:30

As Jesus thus speaks clearly, many believed in him. Earlier in the Gospel such faith was tested and so also this faith will now be tested through more scandalous teaching by Jesus. This testing will reveal whether this faith is genuine or whether it is like that of an earlier crowd at an earlier festival in Jerusalem, which proved false: <<*When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and*>>

needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone>> (John 2:23-25).

II.c.iii.3 John 8:31-38 - True Disciples

Jesus clearly states that those who abide by his words would be set free from sin and those who do not, despite their heritage as the people of God, would remain slaves to their sin.

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’

John 8:31-32

The Jews who had believed in him. This could be the Twelve, or others who had not turned away as described at the end of Chapter Six; but it most likely refers to the new converts in the crowd who had recently come to faith due to these new revelations (v.30).

Their belief is shown to be false in the course of the story (vv.33-47). To continue in Jesus’ word means to continue believing what Jesus has said and walking in truth, in obedience to God: *<<I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father>> (2 John 4), and: <<I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely, how you walk in the truth>> (3 John 3).* This verse shows that continuing to trust Jesus and obey him is one test of who are truly my disciples.

This verse is frequently quoted out of context, but the connection with v.31 shows that Jesus is only talking about one way to know the truth, and that is by continuing to believe and obey his word: *<<Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son>> (2 John 9).*

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free, free from the guilt and enslaving power of sinful patterns of conduct. This is surely one of the most abused texts in the Bible, for it is often cited with no regard for either the condition attached, i.e. remaining in Jesus’ teachings, or the sort of freedom in view, namely, freedom from sin (v.34). In Judaism it was the study of the law that set one free: *<<I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts>> (Psalm 119:45),* so Jesus is claiming for his teaching that which is recognised as true of God’s own teaching.

Paul too speaks of this freedom: *<<For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death>> (Romans 8:2), <<Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom>> (2 Corinthians 3:17), <<For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery>> (Galatians 5:1), and: <<For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another>> (Galatians 5:13).*

³³ They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free”?’

John 8:33

We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. They can claim this because of their ancestry and the promises God made to his people. Had they kept the covenants of God they would indeed have been spiritually free. However, their physical and personal freedom was often removed by the will of God, such as the 400 years in Egypt, or for their disobedience, such as oppression by the Ammonites, the Amalekites, the Moabites and the Philistines during their early years, and then their removal from the land by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and subsequent oppression by the Greeks and the Romans. The Jews suffered persecution in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the 20th Century, and were under British subjection immediately after the war before the state of Israel was re-established. Even today the freedom of Israel is threatened because they do not truly accept God’s will. However, they have always maintained their national identity as descendants of Abraham throughout, so their claim is not entirely groundless.

John the Baptist was also critical of their claims of being descendants of Abraham: <<*Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham*>> (Luke 3:8).

The Jews’ response is a typical example of their misunderstanding. They think Jesus is speaking of national freedom, but he is speaking of inner freedom, which he now makes clear (v.34). Spiritual freedom is the freedom from sin, and sin, at its heart, is an alienation from God. This alienation is caused by sin in the sense of both error and evil. The antidote, faith, corresponds to both of these aspects since it is the appropriation of knowledge of God, which replaces the error, and of forgiveness for humankind’s rebellion against God, which overcomes the evil. Jesus is offering a restored relationship of intimacy with God, which brings life in place of death.

³⁴ Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:34-36

Being a slave to sin means being unable to escape from sinful patterns of conduct without the help of Jesus to set a person free from such influences. One can be a slave to sin or a servant of God through Jesus. In essence, building the right relationship with God does not establish a totally sin free state. Nor does it mean that the relationship will breakdown, be denied or destroyed due to the act of any particular sin. It is a relationship that can be sustained despite individual acts of disobedience; in a master-slave relationship, the master can tolerate and forgive

various breaches of discipline, although habitual, deliberate, persistent, and especially unrepentant sinning will presumably destroy the relationship itself, or perhaps indicate that the relationship was never established by the slave in the first place; such a one chooses instead to remain with the previous master, i.e. as a slave to sin: <<*Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?*>> (Romans 6:16).

What is implicit here is that man cannot be independent; that the person who refuses God's mastery over himself or herself does not thereby achieve independence, but becomes instead, or more appropriately remains, a slave to sin. Evidently, for Jesus, there is no third alternative. The choice confronting everyone is the choice of being ruled by God or being ruled by sin. There is a moral decision to be made. Moral decisions still matter for Christians; giving in to sin results in people becoming increasingly obedient slaves to sin.

The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. Although some slaves did serve their masters for life, many were either set free, sold on, driven away: <<*But what does the scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman'*>> (Galatians 4:30), or were permitted to purchase their freedom. However, they had no rights within the household nor would they inherit any part of the estate as a son would. Jesus clearly contrasts his status in the family of God with that of the rest of humanity, which is enslaved to sin. Given this unique status he is the one who has freedom in God's household and is able to offer it to others. Only God can liberate people from sin, yet here Jesus says that he, the Son, can do so. Once again there is the implied claim regarding his unique oneness with God the Father.

The Son makes you free from both the guilt and the life-controlling power of sin, and probably also from the accompanying influence of demonic activity, as Jesus mentions in v.44. The freedom Jesus is offering is union with the Father, the source of all true life. The way to receive this life, with its freedom from sin's alienation and death, is to remain in his teaching. If you accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour you will be free indeed.

³⁷ I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸ I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'

John 8:37-38

There is no place in you for my word. It was not the persuasiveness or power of Jesus' words that determined how people responded to him, but the spiritual condition of their own hearts. That they look for an opportunity to kill Jesus without regard to the covenants with the Patriarchs and the Law of Moses, i.e. what you have heard from the Father, is evidence of their failure to know God. Their hearts have no room for Jesus' revelation. Since he is telling them what he

has seen and heard from the Father, their inability to accommodate his word means they have no room for God himself in their lives.

I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence is both affirmation that Jesus has come from heaven and that he has come to do the will of his Father: <<Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise>> (John 5:19).

II.c.iii.4 John 8:39-59 - Jesus and Abraham

Jesus' critique of his opponents here reaches its clearest expression, revolving around the theme of Abraham's children. Jesus makes it clear that they do not have the freedom they claim as children of Abraham nor do they reveal the characteristics of the children of Abraham. Instead, their attitudes and actions reveal that they are really children of the devil (v.44). This is the deepest glimpse into the heart of his opponents, and it occurs in the context of Jesus' clearest revelation of his own identity. He is the unique Son of God who can use the divine I AM of himself, even though he is also distinct from God.

³⁹ They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.

John 8:39-40

Jesus had just agreed that they were physically descended from Abraham (v.37), but now he denies that they are truly Abraham's children, for their behaviour contradicts their claim. This implies that Abraham's true children are only those who believe in Jesus: <<For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God>> (Romans 2:28-29), and: <<It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants>> (Romans 9:6-8). What Abraham did most prominently was believe God: <<And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness>> (Genesis 15:6), <<For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'>> (Romans 4:3), <<Just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'>> (Galatians 3:6), and: <<Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God>> (James 2:23). Similarly, the Jews who are speaking here should believe in Jesus, for he comes from God and is speaking the very words of God.

⁴¹ You are indeed doing what your father does.’ They said to him, ‘We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.’
⁴² Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. ⁴⁴ You are from your father the devil, and you choose 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 according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

John 8:41-44

We are not illegitimate children. Their response to Jesus shows they are not truly God’s children, but children of the devil. The clear implication is that not all religious people are children of God, not even Jewish people who reject Jesus, but only those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

We have one father, God himself. The Jews were of course chosen by God as his people but right from the start they had failed to fully obey God’s will. King David accepted God as his Father: <<*He shall cry to me, “You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!”*>> (Psalm 89:26), and was acknowledged as the father of the nation by Jesus: <<*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*>> (Matthew 5:48). If they were to truly recognise God as their father then they would accept Jesus in the person of God’s Son, as Jesus goes on to confirm: If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me.

Why do you not understand what I say? Throughout this Gospel many people misunderstand Jesus and his teaching. Here he gives the reason: it is because you cannot accept, or, ‘you are not able’, Greek *dynamai*, to hear my word, where accept should be taken in the sense of ‘hear and receive’.

The devil was a murderer from the beginning; that is, the devil incited Cain to kill Abel: <<*We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous*>> (1 John 3:12). He does not stand in the truth, i.e. it is not the realm that he lives and acts and thinks in. He is the father of lies; at the fall, the devil blatantly contradicted God’s word and twisted its meaning: <<*The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’*>> (Genesis 3:2-5).

⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe

me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.'

John 8:45-47

But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Jesus came to earth to speak the truth about God: <<*Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'*>> (John 18:37).

You do not hear them in the sense of hearing, believing, and following. This passage is the heart of the matter for Jesus. He speaks the truth because he speaks the words of God, but they do not believe him because they are not from God, that is, they have become alienated from God through their sinful nature and are implicitly following Satan instead, despite their attempts to keep the law.

Which of you convicts me of sin? The people charged him with blasphemy but could offer no proof. The Jewish leaders tried him using false witnesses but even then could not secure a conviction. Jesus was tried before Pilate and King Herod, both of whom found him to be innocent. Even the Roman Centurion at the Cross declared Jesus to be innocent, and yet so many people were desperate to find Jesus guilty of something rather than accepting that he only ever told the truth.

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'

John 8:48

You are a Samaritan and have a demon. Historically, Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans because they were considered to be racially impure, despite their claims to Israeli heritage. Refer to the various comments made in Chapter Four. This is the second charge in John against Jesus for being possessed by a demon, one that he faced on other occasions as well: <<*And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons'*>> (Mark 3:22). Refer also to the comments made on John 7:19-20.

⁴⁹ Jesus answered, 'I do not have a demon; but I honour my Father, and you dishonour me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge.'

John 8:49-50

I do not have a demon. Jesus rejects their charge and continues to insist on his relationship with his Father: I honour my Father, and you dishonour me. In failing to honour Jesus they are disobedient to God's will, which is: <<*so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father*>> (John 5:23a).

Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge. The Father himself is seeking the glory of the Son, just as the Son is seeking the glory of the Father. Jesus and his opponents have traded accusations, and now he

warns them that the one who will pass judgment in this dispute is the very Father to whom he is bearing witness and whom they are rejecting.

⁵¹ Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.'

John 8:51

Whoever keeps my word will never see death. The promise that the faithful disciple will not die is a theme already introduced in John and one that will be developed more fully in Chapter 11. It does not mean the disciple will not physically die. The very fact that the disciple remains in contact with Jesus, the source of life, suggests such communion, with its death to self and life to God.

⁵² The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, "Whoever keeps my word will never taste death." ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?'

John 8:52-53

Now we know that you have a demon. Just as Jesus' promise of life had scandalised an earlier group of would-be disciples (6:60), so it does here as well. They have heard something that they cannot understand. Instead of receiving it with humility and awaiting further insight, they question and reject it. They question whether Jesus is claiming to be greater than their father Abraham, a question similar to the Samaritan woman's question of whether Jesus is greater than their father Jacob (4:12). Jesus' claim to offer life goes beyond anything that Abraham or the prophets could offer or even had experienced themselves, since they had all died. So the question once again boils down to who Jesus is making himself out to be.

The translation 'Who do you claim to be?' misses the point of the question, which is literally, 'Who are you making yourself out to be?' In other words, the issue is not just what Jesus thinks, but what he is promoting. Since only God is the giver of life, they are beginning to perceive the enormity of Jesus' claims. In asking for clarification they are almost acting like a jury, giving the defendant a chance to be condemned with his or her own words. Jesus is happy to oblige since this is what he has come for – to bear witness. So Jesus, as he did with the woman of Samaria, goes on to answer their question.

⁵⁴ Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, "He is our God", ⁵⁵ though you do not know him. But 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.'

John 8:54-55

If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. Jesus refuses to glorify himself but says his Father will do so. He clearly and explicitly identifies his Father: whom you say, "He is our God". Earlier they did not know he was referring to God (v.27), but Jesus has now said it plainly. God is focused upon Jesus, seeking to glorify him.

This is the truth revealed in dramatic form in the Synoptics, for when the Father speaks from heaven at the baptism he speaks of his Son; he repeats this at the transfiguration and adds a call to pay attention to him.

I would be a liar like you. Jesus continues to speak plainly of their ignorance of God. He had spoken of the devil as a liar (v.44), and now he calls these opponents liars, since they claim to know God when in fact they do not.

I keep his word. This phrase had just been used by Jesus as he spoke of his own disciples (v.51), so this repetition indicates that Jesus is the model of discipleship. The idea of keeping God's word picks up many of the themes of discipleship developed in this Gospel, such as docility, humility, receptivity, perseverance, loyalty and obedience. Here, in a passage where Jesus is about to claim divine prerogatives in the clearest terms, there is a clear reminder that he is both distinct from God and submissive to God. His disciples are to share in his relationship with the Father through the Spirit. As they keep his word they are joining him in his own keeping of the Father's word.

⁵⁶ **Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.'**

John 8:56

Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad. Jesus is possibly referring to a whole pattern of joyful and confident faith in Abraham's life, rather than one specific event. If the reference is to one event, some possibilities are Genesis 12:1-3, 17:17-20, or 22:13-18; and Romans 4:13-21. His joy was most likely at the goodness of God and in anticipation of the fulfilment of his promises. The day that Jesus refers to is his whole advent, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension; the total event of salvation that he has brought.

⁵⁷ **Then the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?'** ⁵⁸ **Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.'**

John 8:57-58

In saying you are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham, the opponents focus on Jesus' vision of Abraham, not Abraham's of him. It could be that they are simply pointing out that Jesus is not several thousand years old. This seems to be a stupid response to Jesus' cryptic saying, but the opponents are not the only dull ones in this Gospel, for similar responses are given even by Jesus' true disciples, such as Lazarus' death, which Jesus reported as him falling asleep: <<*The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right'*>> (John 11:12). Jesus could only have known of Abraham's joy at seeing his

day if he had some personal knowledge of him. This can only have been through a personal encounter in heaven or his knowledge as God.

If there had been any uncertainty about Jesus' identity in other passages where he said I am, e.g. 6:35, 9:5, and 11:25, there was no confusion here because Jesus is claiming to be the one who was alive before Abraham was, that is, more than 2,000 years earlier. Jesus does not simply say, 'Before Abraham was, I was', which would simply mean that he is more than 2,000 years old. Rather, he uses the present tense I am in speaking of existence more than 2,000 years earlier, thus claiming a kind of transcendence over time that could only be true of God. As previously mentioned, the words I am in Greek use the same expression found in the Septuagint in the first half of God's self-identification in Exodus 3:14, <<*I am who I am*>>. Jesus is thus claiming not only to be eternal but also to be the God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush. His Jewish opponents understood his meaning immediately and they 'picked up stones' to stone him to death for blasphemy (v.59).

⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

John 8:59

Picked up stones. Stoning was the prescribed punishment for blasphemy, refer to Leviticus 24:16, Deuteronomy 13:6-11, John 10:31-33 and 11:8. However, this punishment was supposed to be the result of righteous judgment, not mob violence, as can be seen from Deuteronomy 17:2-7. Even the great men who came before him were not immune from the fickle mood of the mob who wanted to stone them: <<*So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me'*>> (Exodus 17:4), and: <<*David was in great danger; for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in spirit for their sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God*>> (1 Samuel 30:6).

Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. Jesus slips away from the temple, leaving it secretly, just as he came at the beginning of this section (7:10). This hiddenness has a double significance. Jesus is still a marked man. He came to the temple secretly because of death threats, and now this danger has intensified. On another level, his approach to the temple and now his departure from it in a hidden fashion, corresponds to the emphasis in Chapters 7-8 that the opponents do not know where he comes from or where he goes, meaning the Father. The main points of these two chapters have been Jesus' divine identity, his role as the bringer of God's salvation as water and light, and the opponents' utter alienation from God. This alienation has been stated explicitly, depicted dramatically in their questions and behaviour and is now expressed symbolically in Jesus' leaving in hiddenness. Jesus has claimed to be 'I AM', the divine presence. So when he leaves the temple it is nothing less than 'the departure of the Divine Presence from the old `Holy Space'. He will not return again to the temple; he will come only to its outer precincts (10:23). His formation of a community apart from the temple will now become more apparent.