

Before Abraham was, I Am

We've been in the Gospel of John since January and we're just shy of the halfway point of this book.

You should remember John 20:31 tells us John's goal and desire in writing his gospel:

"These are written so 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's entire motive is that what he has written would move people to believe that Jesus truly is the Messiah, the Son of God. And his desire is that this wouldn't just be a belief, but that this belief would transform people - would give them *life*. And so throughout the book John is always coming back to these two points - *who Jesus is*, the Messiah, the Son of God, and *what Jesus does* - that is give life, abundant life.

John's gospel more than any of the other gospel accounts is focused on Jerusalem and Jesus road to the cross. John spends almost half of the book writing about Jesus last week on earth. And where we're at in the gospel is sort of like the foothills of Jesus climb toward Calvary, toward the cross.

As we look back, Jesus *had* been preaching and teaching in the countryside, in and around the sea of Galilee, but then in Ch. 7 he returns to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths, and begins to declare more clearly who he is. And here in Ch. 8 it is after this great feast, and Jesus continues preaching and teaching in the temple. And as he's teaching he's making these audacious claims about himself. *I'm the light of the world, he says, I'm the living water...*

And as he's teaching these things there are some believe in him. That is, they believe there is something to this guy. But as Jesus goes deeper they get offended by what Jesus is saying and actually turn on him and begin to get angry. And we've seen this over the last couple of weeks.

This morning we're going to look at the tail end of this debate Jesus is having with his Jewish listeners, and we're going to see two incredible claims that Jesus makes. And then we're going to talk about three tremendously life-altering implications that flow from them. You got that? Two astounding claims, and three life-altering implications. So let's dive into the story.

Well, as we saw last week, Jesus has just told his *Jewish* listeners that they are children of the devil who follow and obey the devil instead of God. Well, most people, let alone Jesus' Jewish listeners don't take kindly to being told the devil's their daddy, and so the Jews that are arguing with Jesus get pretty angry and fire right back at Jesus.

v.48: *The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"*

So Jesus listeners basically cuss him out. First, they call him a Samaritan. The Samaritans were half-Jewish and were hated by the Jews. They had basically set up their own religion by throwing out half the OT, setting up their own temple and their own priesthood, but they still thought of themselves as children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So these Jews are calling Jesus a half-breed heretic and even though Jesus is God incarnate they're telling him that he needs to have a demon cast out of him.

But look how patient Jesus is! (v. 49) *Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon."* Talk about an understatement! That's it - there's no fire and brimstone, no pillars of salt. Jesus just tells them, *"I don't have a demon, but you dishonor me."*

"Yet," Jesus says, (v. 50) "I don't seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge."

In other words - "I'm not worried about what you say about me, because it's not my job to look after my reputation. I know who I am, the Father knows, he's the judge and there is coming a day when he will vindicate me and judge you."

Then Jesus skillfully avoids getting caught up in this petty argument and he keeps driving at his main point, which is to lift up who he is. And he is about to make the first of two astounding claims about himself. Listen to this:

(v. 51) *"Truly, truly, I say to you" Jesus says.* Literally Jesus is saying, "Amen, amen." In John's gospel alone Jesus uses this phrase 25x, we're going to see it twice in this passage today. And almost every time Jesus uses this phrase either to introduce truth about who he is, or truth about what he does. Jesus is basically saying, "Everybody listen up, what I'm about to say is ultimate truth."

And here is the first ultimate truth claim. Jesus says, *"If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."*

This is amazing - Jesus is telling his listeners that if you want to avoid death - if you want to never see death, follow him, keep his word. What an staggering claim. The Jews are just as baffled, so the verdict is sealed for them.

(v. 52) *The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.'"*

Notice how they change Jesus words. What did Jesus say? *"If you keep my word you will never see death."* Jesus didn't say taste. Now I'm not sure why the Jews changed these words, maybe they didn't hear right or something. But the key is - what is Jesus response? Nothing! By not responding Jesus is saying - I don't need to correct you because that is my meaning. *"Anyone who keeps my word will never see or taste death."*

Remember, what did John say was the whole point of his gospel? John 20:31. That you may believe...and that by believing you may have...what? LIFE! What is the absence of life? DEATH! When Jesus says that by keeping his word you won't taste or see death he's saying if you are in my word, if you are abiding in me, the living word, you have life and you can *never* have an absence of it, which means you will never taste or see death! Jesus is saying that even at your own funeral you won't be dead.

And this isn't an isolated statement of Jesus. In John's gospel this theme comes up again and again:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” (11:25-26)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (5:24)

How can this be? How can Jesus make this promise? Heb. 2:9 says of Jesus: *“he tasted death for everyone.”* There is only one reason Jesus can promise us this. That reason is the cross. Jesus knows that at the cross he will act as our substitute. *He will taste and see death in his own body so that we can taste and see life.* One of the Puritans puts it this way:

*Christ was all anguish
that I might be all joy,
cast off
that I might be brought in,
surrendered to hell’s worst
that I might attain heaven’s best,
entered darkness
that I might have eternal light.
bore a thorny crown
that I might have a glory-diadem,
bowed his head
that I might uplift mine,
experienced reproach
that I might receive welcome,
closed his eyes in death
that I might gaze on unclouded brightness,
expired
that I might for ever live.*

Yes, our bodies will expire, but for the one who believes in Jesus, who loves Jesus, who evidences that by being a person that loves and keeps and continues in his word, there isn’t even a millisecond pause to life.

Charles Spurgeon wrote this about this reality:

When the believer pass from one world into another, it is something like going from England to Scotland: it is all one kingdom, and one sun shines in both lands. Often travelers by railway ask, “When do we pass from England into Scotland?” There is no jerk in the movement of the train; no broad boundary: you glide from one into the other, and scarce know where the boundary lies. The eternal life that is in the believer glides along from grace to glory without a break. We shall know when we arrive; but the passage may be so rapid that we shall not see it.

Well, Jesus listeners know what an audacious claim he is making. Look at v. 53: *“Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?”*

Well, Jesus is about to tell them exactly who he is and his answer comes in two parts. Here’s the first part:

(v. 56) *“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day.” Jesus says. “He saw it and was glad.”*

Now throughout the Old Testament, the prophets were constantly talking about and looking forward to “The Day”. It was often called “The day of the Lord.” The day when God would set everything wrong right. This day when God would send a rescuer to his people and vindicate his name. That’s what all the OT saints were looking forward to, including Abraham.

And here’s what Jesus is saying. “Abraham rejoiced, Abraham longed, not just to see “the day”, but to see **my day**. My day is the day. I’m the fulfillment of everything that that Abraham hoped for. Abraham went to bed every night praying - ‘Dear God, let me meet Jesus.’ His highest joy was knowing that I was coming.”

Well, of course, the Jews can’t believe their ears! They’re looking at Jesus, this 33 year old man and they try to laugh it off. This man must be insane, they’re thinking.

(v. 57) *“So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’”*

How did you see Abraham, they think. Time machine? Intra-dimensional portal?

Then Jesus says something that no one could have expected: “Here’s how I saw Abraham,” Jesus says, *“Truly, truly (Let me tell you ultimate truth), before Abraham was, I am.”*

Do you notice how awkward this grammar is? Jesus doesn’t say, “I was before Abraham.” He doesn’t say, “Before Abraham, there was me.” It’s, *“Before Abraham was, I am.”*

And Jesus listeners absolutely explode with fury. Look what they do. They don’t get a knife to stab him, or a robe to hang him, but *“they picked up stones to stone him.”* Why would they do that?

Well, you see, as they hear what Jesus says, immediately their minds race back to Exodus 3 where God meets Moses in the burning bush and Moses asks God, who are you? Who should I say sent me? What is your name? And God says, “I am that I am.”

Before that moment God had always been called either by the general Hebrew word for God, Elohim, or by the name Adonai, which means Lord or master. But from this time on, Moses and his descendants always knew that this name, Yahweh, was the highest, the greatest expression of who God is. This was God’s covenant name, his intimate name, his most sacred and holy name for himself.

This name was so sacred to those after Moses that they refused to spell it, they refused to write it, and they refused to speak it.

When God declares this is his name he is saying, I am simply because I am:

- *I am completely self-existent. In fact I am existence itself. Your existence is only due to me.*
- *I have no beginning. I'm uncaused. Everything else owes it's cause to me. I'm the uncaused cause.*
- *I depend on nothing and no one. Everything that exists depends on me.*

So when Jesus takes this name on his lips, when he takes this name for himself, he's saying "*all of those things are true of me!* I am the uncaused cause. I am the beginning and the end. You owe your existence to me!"

"I am the one who spoke and planets came into existence. I am the one who called Abraham and told him I would bless the nations through him. I am the one who delivered Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land. I appointed kings and overthrew kingdoms, I spoke through the prophets, I delivered Israel into and out of exile. *I am that I am!*"

It's no wonder they picked up stones to stone him. Stoning was the required penalty for blasphemy. And Jesus listeners aren't confused by his grammar. They know what Jesus is claiming. Jesus is taking the most transcendent concept of God that the world has ever known and saying, "That's me."

Well, let's look at three life-altering implications of Jesus claims:

The first is this. By so brazenly taking the identity of Yahweh, the giver and sustainer of life, Jesus is forcing us into a decision about who he is.

As you talk to people today about Jesus what do they say about Jesus? Well, popular interpretations of Jesus these days range from fisherman Jesus, to gamer Jesus, to Mixed Martial Arts Jesus, to rockstar Jesus. Some think Jesus is definitely a Republican, while others see him as a Democrat. Some see Jesus as a revolutionary. But, most commonly people say that Jesus was a great moral teacher, who had wonderful ideas of how to live a full life - but God! No! Of course not!

But as you look through the gospels, look at people's response to Jesus. One of the things you never see is people saying what a great moral teacher he is. And here's why. Look at what Jesus is saying! I created the world, I hold you together, I am ultimate reality, one day I'm coming back and your relationship with *me* will determine how you spend eternity.

"My what great insight for living."

Anyone who heard the things that Jesus said about himself would say, as Tim Keller says, "he's either demonic or divine." He's either deranged, or he's evil and a liar, or he's God. You're not left with another choice. C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any

patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Great moral teachers have always pointed away from themselves - there is the way, they said. Jesus said, **“I am the way.”** “There is truth, out there,” a great moral teacher would say. Jesus says, **“I am truth.”**

By claiming to be God Jesus is saying, “Either I’m demonic or divine. Either you crown me or kill me.” If he is the Son of God there’s no room for fence sitters. With great moral teachers it’s easy to put limits on your commitment to them. “I’ll follow him here, but I don’t agree with him there.” But the Son of God? It’s all or nothing. “Crown me or kill me.”

Here is the second implication: If Jesus is Yahweh, the I Am, he is the answer to our deepest needs.

I’ve already mentioned that in that in the OT God was known through different names. Elohim was one of those, which meant God. Adonai - Lord/Master. But throughout the OT, as men and women of God encountered and experienced Him in different ways they gave God names that are always compounds of the name Yahweh. Let me give you some examples:

When Abraham was on the mountain about to plunge the knife into his only son Isaac, and he looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket and knew that God has provided a sacrifice in place of his beloved son - he praised God calling him Yahweh Jireh, or Jehovah, Jireh - **The Lord *is* my provider.**

In the OT days, banners were associated with victory. When God promises Moses that he will give his people victory over their enemies, the Amalekites, Moses builds an altar to **Jehovah Nissi, and says the Lord *is* my banner.**

After God brings his people out of Egypt and settles them in the promised land he gives them his covenant promises. That he will bless and provide for and care for them. He declares to them. **“I am Jehovah Rapha, The Lord your healer.”**

So when Jesus takes for himself this name Yahweh, he takes on all that comes with it. Jesus says, I will meet your deepest needs. He says:

I am Jehovah Shalom, your peace.

I am Jehovah Raah, your shepherd.

I am Jehova Tsidkenu, your righteousness.

Jesus is saying, “I am for you all that you can’t be for yourself.” He’s saying, “all that Yahweh said about himself Old Testament, all that Yahweh was for God’s people, finds its ultimate fulfillment in me.”

So often Jesus is remains on the periphery of our life. We believe he’s God, but he becomes an accessory, an add-on that can be taken off the shelf when there’s we have a need. We put demands on him, but he can make no demands of us. But in claiming to be Yahweh, Jesus is telling us that he is not an accessory to be put on the shelf, but the I Am who needs to be central to everything we are.

Jesus, the I Am, says, “Make me central. I am all that you need. I am all that you long for. I am the bread of life that will satisfy your hunger. I am the light of the world that

will bring light to your darkest places. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way the truth and the life. I'm either everything or nothing. Crown me or kill me.

Lastly, there is a third implication of Jesus claims. Let me ask you this: What would life look like if death weren't really death?

Jerry Seinfeld, one of the great cultural analysts of our time, said this of Americans top fears:

"According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy."

Regardless of the fear of public speaking, Americans spend countless resources avoiding death. In an article in the University of Washington Daily, Sara Wilson writes:

In the longevity-and-image obsessed nation that is America, dying is one of the biggest fears constantly weighing on people's minds. The average American spends 15 percent of his or her wealth over the course of their lifetime on drugs aimed to help them live longer.

Many argue that with religion comes the acceptance of an afterlife and therefore a smaller fear of death. Research has shown, however, that only the extremely religious feel free from this fear, as well as many atheists. The moderately religious, which make up the majority of Americans, is the group which reports the strongest fear of death.

The fear of death can cripple life. When we fear death we live to avoid it. Our lives become about minimizing risk, playing it safe. We live lives devoid of boldness but wrapped in comfort. Lives lacking courage and bravery but cloaked in security.

How would we live if death wasn't really death?

If we really believe Jesus, if we believe his words are true. If Jesus, who spoke and galaxies appeared, says *"Whoever keeps my word will never see or taste death,"* it should spark a revolution in our hearts and lives. It should free us from the fear of death.

If death weren't death, why would we spend our resources avoiding it? If death weren't death, why would our life be spent on ourselves? If death weren't death, our lives should look incredibly different from everyone around us.

God's glory would take precedent over our own security. Eternal joys would gain priority over transient comforts. Our time, talent and treasure would be lavishly spent, not building our own kingdoms, but expended for the true King and his eternal Kingdom.

Jesus audaciously declared himself the King, the I Am. He said that for those who believe in him there is no end to life. He deserves our everything or nothing. Crown him or kill him.

I want to challenge us this morning as a congregation. If we've been sitting on the fence, if fear has been holding us back from throwing it all in with Jesus, if we've been keeping Jesus on the periphery of our lives. Hear Jesus claims this morning. Let them wash over you. And trust him to be life for you. To be the I Am for all your needs. Pray.