

John 8:21-38 When It's Too Late To Believe in Jesus

Introduction: John wrote his Gospel as an evangelistic tract. His goal was to persuade unconverted Jews, living throughout the Roman Empire, to believe in Jesus. The conversations recorded in John 7-8 took place during a festival called the Feast of Booths. In it, John brought to light the unreasonable, hardened opposition of the Jewish leadership. As we read this, ask yourself, how did John design this information to cause an unbeliever to believe in Jesus?

Jesus gave this advice Jesus gave about forming opinions of His identity:

ESV **John 7:24** Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.

Overview: Themes in the rest of this chapter are where Jesus came from and where He was going, who the Father is, and who Jesus is. Moreover, the opposite of each of these was applied to the Jewish leadership: Jesus is from above, they from below; Jesus is not of his world, they are from the world; where Jesus was going, they could not come; God is Jesus' Father, their father is the devil.¹

****** According to Jesus, when would leadership of Judaism finally realize who Jesus really was (8:21-30)?** Jesus said that they would not "know" who He really was until they had lifted Him up (in crucifixion), 8:28.²

What about the crucifixion would convince them that Jesus really was the Messiah?

Doubtless the darkness that fell over the land when Jesus was on the cross, the earthquake, the torn curtain in the temple, the dead saints coming back to life, the testimony of the guards about the angel rolling back the stone, and the empty tomb all played a role in the dawning realization that Jesus really was the Messiah.

The Big Question: A great question is whether this dawning realization would result in salvation or damnation. For example, Satan knows exactly who Jesus is, but He doesn't willingly submit to Him as Lord. As we study this, see what you think about whether these men finally realizing Jesus' true identity would be salvific or not.

- **"them" (8:21):** Jesus was teaching publically in the temple (8:20), but the pronoun "them" evidently refers back to the Pharisees (8:13). This is confirmed in 8:22 ("so the Jews said . . .").
- **"again" (8:21):** This was a continuation of Jesus' public statements made earlier at the temple. It was also the second time Jesus spoke at this feast to these leaders about going away. This first time was in 7:32-36. Sadly, they understood no better this time than the last.

¹ Caron, *John*, 341.

² ESV John 3:14 . . . as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up . . .

What grim prophecy about these leaders did Jesus make in 8:21? He said the leaders would seek Him, not find Him, and die in their sins.

Where was Jesus going to go (8:21)? See 8:22-23. Though not explicitly stated, those who read the rest of John's Gospel would understand that Jesus was going to ascend up, back into heaven. Jesus and the Jews were from two antithetical realms. He was from above (heaven), they were from below (the world). Jesus return to heaven was described by the prophet Daniel many years before:

ESV **Daniel 7:13-14** I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Jesus said that after He went away, they would seek Him (8:21). From what we know about these men, why would they be seeking Him? What would their motive be? It does not sound like they would be seeking Jesus from any good motive:

- a) The Jews (leadership) had been actively been seeking a chance to arrest and then kill Him, which they later succeeded in doing. What Jesus may have meant was that after killing Jesus, they would still be looking for him in the sense that they would still be looking for the Messiah, but they would be looking in vain since the true Messiah had already come and gone.³
- b) Jesus said that they would know who He was after they had lifted Him up on the cross. They may have been seeking to find Him again after His resurrection so they could stop Him. This hardened unbelief is reflected in a T-shirt someone saw in modern Israel that said "If Jesus comes back, we'll kill him again."
- c) However, Jesus went on to say that they would know who He really was when the lifted Him up on the cross. Maybe they would be seeking Him for salvation, but it would be too late, just as it is too late for those now in Hell. The men in leadership had committed the unpardonable sin: deciding on behalf of the nation that Jesus was not the Messiah. Since there was no denying the miracles He did, they pronounced that Jesus did miracles in the power of Satan, thus blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

ESV **Matthew 12:31-32** . . . every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

ESV **Hebrews 10:28-31** Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy . . . How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God . . . and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

³ Carson, *John*, 341.

What does it mean for any person today to die in his sins (8:21)? It means he will face God's judgment for the full weight of his sins. Since He is infinite God, Jesus could in a finite time of the cross pay for sins that it would take you, who are finite, infinity to suffer in hell. Instead of Jesus paying the price for your sins, you pay the price totally on your own:

ESV **John 3:36** Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

ESV **Romans 1:18** . . . the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . .

What irony is there in 8:22? In a way they were profoundly right.⁴ They wrongly thought Jesus might kill Himself to escape them. The irony is that it was they who would kill Him, and that His escape would be by going back to heaven.

• **"world" (8:23):** Jesus said these people were of "this world" (8:23). By world He meant the "fallen moral order in conscious rebellion against its creator".⁵

Based on 8:24, what is the only way they could avoid dying in their sins? "Unless" is a necessary condition that must be met. It offers an exception clause. The way to avoid dying in one's sins is to believe in Jesus. For these men, it would have meant believing in Jesus *before* they killed Him (it would be too late after the fact).

What did Jesus mean when He said they must believe that "I am he" (8:24)? The NIV reads this, "I am the one I claim to be" (i.e., the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah). That the Greek here is odd is suggested by their question, "Who are you?" (8:25). They weren't quite sure at first what He meant. Greek does not really match the Greek in the LXX for the great "I am" declaration of Exodus 3:14. However, it does match the Greek of the LXX throughout Isaiah 40-55 in claims Jehovah was making about Himself.⁶ They didn't understand it as first, but Jesus was claiming to be the LORD (Jehovah). For instance:

ESV **Isaiah 43:10** "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, ". . . that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me."

Blasphemy: For a person other than God to apply this title to himself would be blasphemous.

Why is the question they asked Jesus in 8:25 ultimately a ridiculous question? It was ridiculous because He had been declaring and proving over and over again exactly who He was: "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning." There are none so blind as those who will not see!⁷

⁴ Carson, *John*, 342.

⁵ Carson, *John*, 342.

⁶ Carson, *John*, 343.

⁷ Proverb attributed to John Heywood in 1546.

ESV **John 1:19-34** . . . this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed . . . "I am not the Christ . . . I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" . . . The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ". . . I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

In 8:26, Jesus declared that He had much to say about them. Was that good or bad? Since He associated what He had to say with judgment, it was bad for them.

The word "but" usually indicates a contrast of some sort. Why is there a "but" in the middle of 8:26? Jesus Himself had much to say about the Jews, but at that point His mission was to say what He had heard from the One who sent Him.

According to 8:27, what problem did the Jews have? They just didn't get it. They didn't know that Jesus was referring to God the Father was the One who sent Him.

Original Application: John wanted his original readers to realize the lack of spiritual discernment that characterized the religious leaders in Judea.

Review: According to 8:28-29, when would the Jews finally know who Jesus really was? It would not be until they had lifted Jesus up (on the cross). However, the implication is that even though they would realize it, they still would not submit to it. This same type of "too late" recognition is mentioned by John in Revelation in describing Jesus' A.D. 70 judgment on Judea:

ESV **Revelation 1:7** Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.⁸

What link was there between lifting Jesus up and knowing who He was (8:28-29)?

What impact did this exchange between Jesus and the Jews have on many who were standing there listening (8:30)? John recorded that many believed in Jesus. The problem, as we are about to see, is that like so many times before, theirs evidently was a defective faith.

ESV **John 2:23-24** . . . many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people.

ESV **John 6:14-15** When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

ESV **John 6:66** . . . many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.

ESV **John 6:70** Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil."

⁸ The tribes are the twelve tribes of Israel and the Greek word for "earth" could just as legitimately be rendered as "land" (i.e. the Promised Land).

The faith that fizzles before the finish had a flaw from the first!

******What did Jesus say that shows fatal flaws in the faith of those who believed in Him (8:31-38)?** Jesus first warned that true His disciples would abide in His word (perhaps implying that they would not), then announced that He knew they sought to kill Him and that His word was not in them, and finally that they had different spiritual fathers.

Wake-Up Call: Taken at face value, this whole section is very disturbing. Here are people who in some sense had “believed” in Jesus, yet they clearly were not saved. John wrote this to unbelieving Jews to help them understand what true, saving faith really looks like. It was far from easy believism!

•**“The Jews who had believed” (8:31):** John usually used “the Jews” to refer to the religious leadership of Judaism. If that is the case here, then Jesus directed these comments specifically to those within the leadership who were beginning to believe in him.

Back to 8:31-32; what is the mark of a true believer? A true believer will abide in Jesus’ word, know the truth, and be set free (from sin). Perseverance is the mark of a true believer.

What does it mean to abide in Jesus’ word (8:31)? An abode is where you live; you abide in an abode. It means that you stay in, you live in, you continue on believing in Jesus’ and His teachings.

What “truth” (8:32) is it that Jesus meant—the truth about the Kennedy assassination? The truth about 9-11? What truth? Although Jesus Himself is the truth, Jesus most likely is referring to the teachings of Jesus.⁹

ESV **John 1:14** . . . the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth.

ESV **John 1:17** . . . grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

ESV **John 14:15** If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

ESV **John 14:21** Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.

What is it that the truth will set us free from (8:32)? It will set us free from sin, 8:34.

Warning: Misapplication of this verse is common. I once shared the Gospel with a homosexual who cited this text to justify his perversion; he felt he had been set free from false religious prohibitions.

⁹ Carson, *John*, 348.

What misunderstanding did these “believers” express in 8:33? They thought Jesus referred to physical slavery. Though subject to Roman military rule, the Jews, unlike so many others, were not Roman slaves.

Based on 8:34, why is sin so dangerous? Sin is addictive to the point of becoming enslaved to it.

ESV **Romans 6:16** . . . 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 . . .

What eventuality did Jesus warn about for those enslaved to sin (8:35-36)? Those enslaved to sin will eventually have to leave the house. This evidently is an allusion to the Father’s “house” of the faithful. There is a shake-out coming, and only the free “sons” will be left.

ESV **Matthew 13:24-30** The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also . . . “Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

According to 8:36, who is it who can set us free? The Son was claiming authority to liberate slaves, to set people free (from sin). Jesus is the Great Emancipator. Freedom is not the liberty to sin, but the freedom to do what God requires.

According to 8:37, what explained their desire to kill Jesus? It was because His word found no place in them.

How it is even remotely possible that these people who supposedly believed in Jesus (8:31) also sought to kill him (8:37)? Taken at face value, this shows the defective nature of their faith. It truly was a fatal faith. This also shows the fickleness of their faith.

On the other hand, perhaps what we see here are responses of two different groups with the leadership (“the Jews”). One group within “the Jews” believed in Jesus, and it was to them that He spoke in 8:31. However, it is possible that a different, unbelieving group from with “the Jews” interrupted and began objecting in 8:33ff.

What contrast did Jesus draw in 8:38? Even though they were all descendants of Abraham with the same physical father, Jesus and those to whom He was speaking had two different spiritual fathers.

ESV **Romans 2:28-29** . . . no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart . . .

So What?

John wrote this to unbelieving Jews to cause them to believe. How does what John wrote in this passage about the leadership explain why Jesus was rejected?

- 1) The problem was with the leaders of Judaism, not with Jesus. Jesus was rejected because “the Jews” were of their father, the devil. They were not of God. It was ultimately not a head problem, it was a heart problem.
- 2) A further application to John’s original readers is found in the picture Jesus painted of a true, saving faith versus a false, fake faith. John wanted to show his readers the difference between a saving faith and a fake faith. Jesus wants true disciples, not bogus believers.

**** = Ask this question before reading the text. This will engage people’s minds and focus their attention.

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