

## John 8:48–59

### Introduction

Throughout all of John chapter eight we've seen constant conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees (8:13), between Jesus and "the Jews" (8:22), and between Jesus and "those Jews who had believed in Him" (8:31). We say "conflict" but that could imply two parties fighting for the upper hand and we should be able to see by now that that's not the case. It's *Jesus* who shows from start to finish that He's in complete control. His mastery of the situation is complete. Many of His listeners, of course, don't see this and certainly won't admit it, but after the last words that Jesus spoke (vv. 42-47) they find themselves with nothing left to say. Maybe they're thinking that Jesus is hopeless or that it's pointless to go on "arguing" with Him, but the reality is that they were unable to cope with His wisdom and the Spirit with which He was speaking (cf. Acts 6:10). So, feeling trapped, they (now "the Jews") resort to slandering and insulting Jesus.

**I. John 8:48** — The Jews answered and said to Him, "Do we not well say that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?"

It's possible that the Samaritans, in claiming to be true children of Abraham (cf. 4:12; a claim the Jews rejected), in turn denied or at least cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Jews' claim to be children of Abraham (cf. Carson). Since Jesus has denied that these Jews are Abraham's "children" (8:39-40) He sounds just like the Samaritan "heretics" and might as well be one of them. Never mind the fact that Jesus was clearly talking about a moral and spiritual likeness and not about being literal, physical children (cf. 8:37). It's not *their* relationship to Abraham that should be questioned, but rather *Jesus'*. But *if* this is their "logic," notice how they're saying that a *Jewish* offspring of Abraham (Jesus) may be no better than a Samaritan who *they would say* has no claim to be called a child of Abraham. They admit the logic upon which Jesus grounds His own denial that *they* are truly "children" of Abraham (cf. 8:37-41), and yet they still pretend not to understand Jesus and refuse to answer Him. They still want to rely on their physical descent as though this physical descent and their possession of the Law automatically guaranteed their spiritual likeness to Abraham. How careful we must be not to confuse spiritual privilege (knowledge; means of grace [Christian family, Church, tasting of the powers of the age to come; Heb. 6:5]; etc.) with the reality of being a true member of God's "spiritual" family.

*If* the Samaritans cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Jews' claim to be children of Abraham, then this was only one of their "heretical" teachings. But don't all heretical teachings have their source in the devil himself? Paul speaks in 1 Timothy 4 of the "doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). So the Jews conclude that Jesus Himself, in being no better than a Samaritan heretic, must have a demon. It's not *they* who are in league with the devil as his children (cf. 8:44), but Jesus Himself who has a demon.

Not only has Jesus denied their claim to be children of Abraham, He's also claimed to be the one who has come from and been sent forth by God (cf. 8:42). One commentator says that "Samaritans were known for prophets who made great claims... Dositheus... said he was the Son of God, and Simon Magus... claimed to be 'the Great Power.' Justin [Martyr] viewed these men as demon possessed... and Origen reported that the Jews regarded them as mad" (Beasley-

Murray; cf. Michaels).<sup>\*</sup> But in the end, calling Jesus a “demon-possessed Samaritan” is just the Jews’ way of trying to ignore and evade the true meaning of His words – words that they can’t *answer* and which at the same time they can’t *receive* because they’re slaves of sin.

When you’ve been called a “demon-possessed Samaritan,” how do you respond? Regardless of the legitimacy of the Jew’s view of Samaritans, what they intended by this label was the ultimate slander. So how do you respond to such an attack? How does *Jesus* respond?

**II. John 8:49–50** — Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. I<sup>†</sup> do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges.”

Jesus “defends” Himself *only in so far* as defending Himself is essential to promoting the honor and the glory of His Father. Jesus never says, “I am not a Samaritan,” because that “accusation” by itself has nothing to do with the honor and the glory of His Father. Let the Jews call Him a Samaritan all day long and Jesus might say nothing. What Jesus does say is this: “I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father”; and so the implication is this: when you “dishonor Me”—who honors My Father—you dishonor *My Father*. Jesus isn’t bothered in the slightest at being called a “demon-possessed Samaritan” *on His own account*, but He *is* deeply “offended” on account of His Father whose honor He seeks.

When we see *Jesus* never seeking His own glory, how can we not be convicted by how self-seeking *we* are? How can we not be convicted by how little we’re motivated (in comparison!) by a sincere, unadulterated desire to promote the honor of God? When we see *Jesus* never seeking His own glory, but caring only for the honor of His Father, how can we not believe that He is who He says He is – that He came from and was sent forth by God to speak God’s words and to be God’s Word to us? When we hear and see Jesus, we learn what it is to walk humbly with our God in this world.

Jesus said, “I do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges.” In other words: There is one who seeks My glory and who therefore judges all those who dishonor *Him* by dishonoring Me – the One whom *He* sent forth *from Himself* into the world. We’re reminded of how the Apostle Peter says that Jesus “kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23). Jesus was able to leave His own honor and vindication completely in the hands of His Father because He was concerned only with the honor and the glory of His Father. Yes, Jesus looked forward to being glorified and vindicated by His Father (“for the joy set before Him”; Heb. 12:2; cf. Phil. 2:5-11), but this joy in His own glory and vindication was one and the same with His ultimate joy in always seeking the glory and the honor of His Father. If Jesus, the one who came from and was sent forth by God was able to leave His own honor and vindication in the hands of His Father, how much more should we do the same? Shouldn’t we be entrusting ourselves unreservedly to Him who judges righteously?

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<sup>\*</sup> These examples come from after the time of Jesus, but they probably still shed light on why the Jews accuse Jesus of being no better than a “demon-possessed Samaritan.”

<sup>†</sup> In context, I believe that the mild adversative force of *de* is actually best communicated by being left untranslated. While *de* is helpful in the Greek, translating the *de* in English would seem not to be as helpful (contrast the strong adversative, *alla*, in the first half of the verse [*“but I honor My Father”*]).

We said that Jesus “defends” Himself *only in so far* as this is essential to promoting the honor and the glory of His Father. Related to this, we can also see how Jesus “defends” Himself out of a sacrificial love for those who hate and slander Him. When Jesus says, “I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me,” that’s not meant as a malicious accusation (contrast with the Jews), but as an earnest warning. When you dishonor Me, you’re dishonoring My Father because He is the one who seeks my glory – *and who judges*. Jesus responds to the slander of the Jews not only with a gracious warning, but even with another gracious invitation.

**III. John 8:51** — “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death.”

Here is a wonderful promise and balm for our souls. The one who keeps Jesus’ word will never come under judgment because He has believed and honored the one whose glory the Father seeks. Here also is a call and exhortation. To believe in Jesus is to keep His word; or as Calvin says, to be those who don’t “merely nod their assents [no matter how vigorously]... or profess with the tongue that they approve His teaching, but who... keep it as a precious treasure.” “If anyone keeps My word”—if anyone believes and honors *Me*, the one who seeks only the honor of My Father who sent *Me*—then that person honors the Father, and *therefore* that person, Jesus says, “will never see death.”

“Truly, truly, I say to you...” Jesus is calling the Jews to listen carefully to His word and to keep that word so that *they*—even they who have just labelled Him a demon-possessed Samaritan—might never see death. “Truly, truly, I say to you...” Jesus is warning the Jews that if they will not listen carefully to His word and *keep* that word—if they will persist in dishonoring *Him*—then there is One who seeks and judges, and the judgment is death. Jesus is talking about spiritual death at the final judgment. Therefore, Jesus is promising a “life which physical death cannot extinguish... the life of the kingdom of God, over which death has no power and which is destined for resurrection” (Beasley-Murray).

**IV. John 8:52–53** — The Jews said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets also; and You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.’ Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself to be?”

Did the Jews really believe that Jesus was talking about physical death? Did they really think He was saying that anyone who believes in Him would never physically die? No, they didn’t. But it doesn’t necessarily follow from this that they could fully understand what Jesus *did* mean. Did they fully understand that Jesus was talking about the *present possession—even in death*—of that life of the coming kingdom of God – that life over which death has no power and which is destined for resurrection? Probably not. And yet they did believe in the resurrection to life in the coming kingdom. They did believe that. What really “offends” them, then, is not so much the idea of “never seeing death”—whatever that might mean—but the fact that Jesus associates this promise *with Himself*. What “offends” them is not so much the idea of “never seeing death” but rather that Jesus says, “*If anyone keeps My word* he will never see death.” That’s why they exclaim at the end: “Whom do *You* make *Yourself* to be?” And yet because they’ve not yet been able to truly *answer* Jesus, they must keep on pretending to believe that Jesus is talking about physical death.

Jesus knows the Jews don't really think He's talking about physical death. So He never responds to this "misunderstanding" or offers any clarification. Jesus knows, furthermore, that the Jews are not really stumbling over the idea of "never seeing death." "Surely **You** are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do **You** make **Yourself** [whom do you exalt **Yourself**] to be?" The Jews hear Jesus *making Himself—exalting Himself*—to be someone greater than Abraham, but didn't Jesus just say in verse fifty: "I do not seek my glory"? Everything Jesus says about *Himself* He says for the sake of *others* and because He delights to obey and honor *His Father*. This isn't self-exaltation; it's the ultimate submission and dependence. When Jesus says, "If anyone keeps *My word* he will never see death," what do we hear? Do we hear self-exaltation? Or do we hear love? Do we hear self-exaltation? Or do we hear a wholehearted submission and obedience to His Father's will? So we read in verses 54-55:

**V. John 8:54-55** — Jesus answered, "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'He is our God'; and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word."

Who does Jesus "make Himself" to be? One who knows God as His own Father and who honors Him and keeps His Word. Is there any hint in this of self-glorification? Who does Jesus "make Himself" to be? One who doesn't glorify Himself but waits patiently upon the Father. And how does the Father glorify Jesus? We know the answer is through death and burial and then resurrection from the dead (cf. 3:14; 8:28; 17:1). As one commentator says: "God's mode of glorifying Jesus, through self-sacrifice in shameful death, is as distant from self-glorification as heaven is from hell" (Beasley-Murray). "Whom do You make Yourself to be?" the Jews ask; and Jesus answers in effect: "By even asking that question, you prove that you've missed the entire point. By even asking that question you prove that you have not come to know God *because you have not come to know Me*. I do not make Myself to be anyone. "I do not seek My glory." "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing." You cannot know God because you have not come to know Me *as* the one who lives only for My Father's honor.

Can we see in Jesus' words the ultimate self-abasement and also the ultimate display of glory? He is the only one who has never "*come*" to know God but who knows Him *already* as His own Father. Here, then, is the glory not of self-glorification but of the ultimate abasement (cf. 17:24) which the Father will not fail to reward by raising Jesus from the dead and seating Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places (cf. Eph. 1:20; Phil. 2:5-22). Here in the One who keeps *His Father's* word is the One who can promise that all those who keep *His* word will never see death.

The Jews have pretended to think that Jesus is talking about physical death, so they point out that even Abraham died. But Jesus knows they don't really think He's talking about physical death. And so in that case, *has* Abraham *really* "**died**"? Jesus continues in verse fifty-six:

**VI. John 8:56** — “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would<sup>‡</sup> see My day, and he saw it and was glad.”

Paul says that “[God] preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you [**in your seed**; cf. Gen. 22:18; 26:4; 28:14] shall all the nations be blessed’” (cf. Gal. 3:8). Stephen says:

- Acts 7:4–5 — God had [Abraham] move to this country in which you are now living. But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, **even when he had no child**, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM [cf. Gen. 13:15; 17:8] AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS SEED AFTER HIM.

Abraham understood that God’s promise of an everlasting inheritance was dependent on the “seed”—or the offspring—that God would give him. Abraham also understood that his own entrance into that everlasting inheritance was dependent upon being raised up himself on the last day. So let’s put those two things together. Abraham understood that if it was His seed or offspring that was to bring blessing to all the nations, then even the blessing of His own resurrection and entrance into the kingdom must be going to come to him through his seed. Abraham rejoiced—the Greek word point to an exultant, overflowing joy (he rejoiced exceedingly)—that he would one day see his Messiah and be raised up by his own offspring to an inheritance that is imperishable and undefiled and that would not fade away, reserved in heaven for him (cf. 1 Pet. 1:4; Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16, 39-40). If Abraham rejoiced so exceedingly that he would one day see the Messiah and His kingdom, how much should we rejoice who have seen the Messiah and who have “*already*” entered His kingdom?

Abraham rejoiced that he would see the Messiah’s day, Jesus says, *and he **did** see it and was glad*. Abraham saw the Messiah’s day not as we see it, but in the shadows of type and prophecy. Remember what we just said: Abraham understood that if it was His seed or offspring that was to bring blessing to all the nations, then even the blessing of His own resurrection and entrance into the kingdom must be going to come to him through his seed or offspring. And yet Abraham had no offspring (not by his wife, Sarah). For twenty-five years his wife had been unable to conceive. This isn’t just about the pain and sorrow of childlessness, or even just about believing a promise that God had made to Abraham “personally”; for Abraham, it was about the Gospel and the promise of resurrection! Then, when Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety years old, Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son, Isaac (Gen. 17:17; 21:5; cf. 12:1-4). The Apostle Paul says:

- Romans 4:17b–21 — [Abraham believed God] who **gives life to the dead** and calls into being that which does not exist. In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, “SO SHALL YOUR OFFSPRING BE.” Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now **as good as dead** since he was about a hundred years old, and the **deadness** of Sarah’s womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.

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<sup>‡</sup> Gr. *hina*. See Michaels.

Abraham saw in the birth of the promised seed, Isaac, a type of that resurrection to which he was already looking and which he knew depended on the “seed”—or the offspring—that God would give him through Isaac. “**He saw** [the coming kingdom of the Messiah in the extraordinary birth of Isaac] **and was glad.**”

When Isaac was a young man (probably at least twenty years old), God told Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering. It was only when Abraham had traveled to the land of Moriah and built the altar and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, and stretched out his hand and taken the knife to slay his son that the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and stayed his hand (Gen. 22:9-12). The writer of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 11:17–19 — By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his one and only son; it was he to whom it was said, “IN ISAAC YOUR OFFSPRING SHALL BE CALLED.” **He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also did receive him back as a parable** [a parable of resurrection].

Abraham saw in this restoration to him of his son a type of that resurrection to which he was already looking and which he knew depended on the “seed”—or the offspring—that God would give him through Isaac. “**He saw** [in the restoration to him of his son the coming kingdom of the Messiah] **and was glad.**” He was “*glad*” because he saw the Messiah’s day already in the birth of Isaac and his restoration to him on Mount Moriah. He “*rejoiced exceedingly*” because he knew that one day he would be raised up to enter—himself—into the Messiah’s kingdom. So Jesus says, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see **My** day, and he saw it and was glad.”

Fourteen hundred years before Jesus was born Abraham was keeping Jesus’ word so that he might never see death. Abraham possessed already in some mysterious and wonderful way—and still possesses even in death—that life over which death has no power and which is destined for resurrection. This explains how Jesus can say to the Sadducees in Matthew chapter twenty-two:

- Matthew 22:31–32 — “But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: ‘I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living [of those who will never see death].”

The Jews claimed the physical death of Abraham as proof that Jesus had a demon. Jesus claimed the life of Abraham—the life that gives birth to resurrection—and the obedient faith of Abraham as evidence that He spoke the truth.

**VII. John 8:57** — So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?”

It was a common belief of many Jews that Abraham—as a prophet—had been given insight into the coming kingdom of the Messiah – though they wouldn’t have argued for this in the way that the New Testament does. How can Jesus know that Abraham rejoiced not just that he would see

the Messiah's day but that he would see "**My**" day (*Jesus'* day)? Had Jesus ever seen Abraham? Was Jesus there to talk with Abraham and know exactly what was in his heart and who the Messiah was that he was looking for? How can Jesus really know that Abraham was looking for *Him*?

**VIII. John 8:58** — Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am."

Is Jesus glorifying Himself? Is Jesus "making Himself"—exalting Himself—to be someone greater than Abraham? Jesus says this not to promote Himself just for the sake of promoting Himself. Jesus says this not to claim co-eternity with God just for the sake of claiming co-eternity with God. Jesus says this so that we might be saved and so that in honoring Him and in keeping His word we might honor His Father. "Before Abraham was born," Jesus says, "I am." Which is to say: I am the only Savior. Listen to what God said through the prophet Isaiah:

➤ Isaiah 43:11–13 (cf. 48:12) — "I, even I, am the LORD, and there is no **savior** besides Me. It is I who have declared and **saved** and proclaimed, and there was no strange god among you; so you are My witnesses," declares the LORD, "and I am God. **Even from eternity I am [He]...**"

"Before Abraham was born," Jesus says, "I am." Which is to say: I am the eternal Son and Word of the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, *who is not the God of the dead but of the living* (cf. Ex. 3:13-15; Mat. 22:31-32). Even in death Abraham lives because he rejoiced that he would see My day and he saw it and was glad. And even in death you, too, will live and never die if you honor *Me* and keep *My* word ("Truly, truly, I say to you").

**IX. John 8:59** — Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

The Jews can only hear Jesus exalting Himself to be someone great. But we hear in these same words Jesus' submission to, and dependence upon His Father – and the depth of His saving love for us. So rather than picking up stones to throw at Him, we—by grace—fall down on our faces before Him. We see that though He hides Himself now, this is only so that when His "hour" (cf. 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1) comes He might go obediently to the cross for us. Praise God for giving us eyes to see and ears to hear! And now let *us* walk even as *He* walked (cf. 1 Jn. 2:6).