

3. John transitioned into the next section of this encounter in the treasury by noting that many of those present came to believe in Jesus (8:30). The implication is that they had reached the conclusion that He was indeed Israel's Messiah and the context indicates that this conviction was conditioned by the things He had been saying that day. John didn't explain what exactly these men now believed about Jesus (what comprised the content of their faith in Him), but he constructed his account so as to suggest that their faith derived, at least in part, from fear and self-concern. Jesus had pronounced God's impending judgment and destruction upon all who rejected Him, and this certainly would have caught His audience's attention. However they interpreted His words, it seems that some were sufficiently convinced that the best course of action was to embrace Him.

Clearly each person that day had his own reasons and motives for embracing Jesus as the Messiah. There's no doubt they were influenced by the things they'd seen and heard there in the treasury, but it's also likely that some of them had a broader experience with Jesus given the duration and range of His ministry. Whatever these individuals believed about Him, the account suggests that they expressed their intent to become His disciples.

- a. Jesus responded to their stated faith by clarifying what discipleship entails and conveys: His true disciples are those who abide in His word (8:31-32). And because His word is truth (cf. 1:14), those who abide in it come to know the truth so as to be set free. This is a dense statement which demands unpacking:
- First of all, the statement shows that faith in Jesus involves becoming His *disciple*. A disciple is a *learner* – a person who devotes himself to his teacher and his instruction. The goal of discipleship is *reproduction*, with the teacher effectively replicating himself – that is, reproducing his own knowledge, understanding, values, priorities and practice in his disciples. Faith thus implies more than understanding and conviction: *It involves the formation of an intimate relationship having its orientation and goal in reproducing in the believer the life and likeness of the one believed in.*
 - Discipleship is a teacher-learner phenomenon and thus involves *communication*, non-verbal as well as verbal. In the case of Jesus, discipleship involves hearing, owning and applying His *word* as He spoke it and as He explained and attested it by His works (in His own life and the lives of others). For the first disciples, this was a matter of interacting with Jesus, the incarnate Word, *personally* – listening to Him, observing Him and questioning Him. Since His ascension, discipleship now involves interaction with His inscripturated word and its ministration by His Spirit.
 - A fundamental product of discipleship is *knowledge*. The successful disciple comes to know the truth as his master embodies and conveys it. But since discipleship has its goal in replication, the disciple's true growth in knowledge involves his authentic conformity to his teacher. The disciple doesn't merely come to know what his master knows; he becomes like his master – thinking, discerning, judging and living as he does.

- And, assuming that the teacher (master) instructs his disciple in what is true, discipleship always brings *freedom*. This is because accurate knowledge, insight and understanding liberate the mind from the obstructions, distractions and deviations inherent in error and wrongful thinking. To the extent that a person's thinking and knowledge are incorrect, clouded or misguided, he exists in a kind of bondage, much like a blind man's liberty is constrained by his inability to perceive his surroundings. The blind man stumbles and falls because of what he cannot see, and so it is with those who don't perceive the truth.

Just as knowledge is power, so the acquisition of true knowledge always enhances one's freedom. So Jesus insisted that His genuine disciples do come to know the truth and the truth sets them free. But He had more in mind than the natural freedom which knowledge affords to men. This is obvious from the Jews' response and Jesus' answer to them (8:33-38).

- b. When Jesus declared to these "believers" that the truth would set them free, He was implying that they were in subjection to some sort of bondage. They, like all Israel, recognized that they were subject to Rome's domination; indeed, the nation was expecting the Messiah to deliver them from their Roman overlords. In that respect, every Israelite would concede that he wasn't free. But it's clear from John's account that these men understood Jesus to be referring to *spiritual bonds* of some sort. And that was an arena in which they would not acknowledge any lack of freedom; they were *absolutely* free because they were children of Abraham (8:33). Whereas the pagan Gentiles languished in the bonds of their estrangement from the creator God, He'd liberated Abraham and his descendents by taking them to Himself to be His unique covenant people (cf. Genesis 12:1-3; Deuteronomy 7:1-8; Hosea 1-2; Malachi 1:1-3; etc.). The sons of Israel enjoyed unique covenant status and consecration; unlike the nations which their God gave over to themselves, *they* were the "apple of His eye," set free and set apart to be His elect son (Exodus 4:21-23; Zechariah 2:7-9). Indeed, Israel's freedom as Yahweh's covenant people was precisely the premise behind their ordained role among the Gentiles: Abraham's children didn't need to be set free; rather, they were to bring their freedom to the enslaved Gentiles by displaying Yahweh to them and allowing them to become adopted children of their father Abraham.
- c. Jesus answered their objection by noting that the freedom He was talking about is associated with *deliverance from sin*. In terms of covenant status, it was true that Israel – and so these Jews speaking with Him – possessed a freedom not enjoyed by the Gentiles; they were children of Abraham and so Yahweh's sons. But the *status* of covenant sonship doesn't itself imply the *actual* reality of it: Israel was Yahweh's son in title only; the reality was that they were just as alienated from Him as the Gentiles were. They bore no more family resemblance and showed no more love and obedience to their covenant Father than the Gentiles did. Yahweh had chosen Israel to be His son unto the world, but they were in need of liberation and reception into true sonship just as much as the rest of mankind (8:34-35).

These Jews (like all Israel) were confident and secure in their Abrahamic heritage. Yahweh had chosen Abraham and his descendents and set them apart to Himself; He was their covenant Father and they were sons He'd taken to dwell with Him. By covenant decree, the children of Israel were sons in Yahweh's house; but they were rebellious, unbelieving sons (ref. Isaiah 1:1-4; Ezekiel 2:1-8; Hosea 1:1-2:13, 11:1-7; etc.) enslaved in their alienation from Him just as thoroughly as were the Gentiles (cf. Luke 3:7-9). This is the reality Jesus was pointing to when He declared that sin yields slavery and slaves don't remain in the house.

- The Israelite people regarded themselves as sons and therefore heirs having an inalienable right to all that pertains to their covenant Father.
- Jesus conceded that sons belong in their father's house and have an enduring right with respect to it. Slaves, on the other hand, serve in the house at the master's discretion; they are not sons and therefore have no claim regarding the house and their place in it.

As it is in human households, so it is in Yahweh's house: In spite of their confidence in their status and abiding share in their Father's covenant house, the unbelieving and rebellious sons of Israel were going to find themselves expelled from the house as worthless slaves. *Even more shocking, their covenant sonship was going to be transferred to non-Israelites who would take their place in Yahweh's household* (cf. Matthew 8:1-13; Luke 13:22-30). The basis for this is the fundamental and critical truth that genuine sonship exists in the Son, so that men become sons by sharing in Him and His sonship. Thus Jesus' declaration: Men must be liberated from their slavery if they are to become sons and have the right to remain in the Father's house, for slaves have no such right. The grant of sonship and its rights depends upon becoming freemen, but both freedom and sonship are found in the Son (8:34-36). The Scripture fleshes this out as follows:

- Yahweh chose Abraham's children to be His covenant sons for the sake of the world, but they proved incapable of fulfilling their identity and calling. They perpetually violated the covenant as slaves of their unbelief, even while continuing to regard themselves as sons (albeit unfaithful ones).
- Because Israel was God's chosen instrument in His purpose to restore His creation, the nation's covenant failure had monumental and catastrophic significance. Either His design and oath to Abraham would fail with Israel's failure, or He could bring forth another covenant son for Abraham – an Israelite who could fulfill in Himself Israel's identity and calling.

Jesus was that son of Abraham: He was the son whose faithful sonship showed Him to be Yahweh's son *indeed*; He was the true son who alone had the right to remain in His Father's house. But He'd come to fulfill Israel's calling, which meant seeing that house filled with children (Isaiah 53-54) – children liberated from their slavery; children taken from enslaved Israel as well as the nations.

- d. The Israelite people regarded themselves as Yahweh's children because they were Abraham's covenant descendents. Jesus was a Jew and fully understood this, and He acknowledged to His hearers their Abrahamic descent and the confidence which they derived from it. They put their confidence in Abraham and claimed him as their advocate; in this respect, they were merely owning Israel's historical status and following the practice of their forefathers. *Jesus, however, negated that way of thinking, making the shocking assertion that genealogical descent from Abraham doesn't make a person an authentic son of Abraham.* Thus genealogy provides no basis for confidence and descent from Abraham doesn't make him one's advocate. To be a true son of Abraham, one must be *like* Abraham, for a son bears the likeness of his father. A father has his extension in his sons, and this means that true sons cannot exist in contradiction of their father. Abraham held to Yahweh's covenant and its promise of a seed in whom all the world would be blessed. Jesus was that seed, and thus He proclaimed that Abraham saw His day and rejoiced (8:56). Abraham believed God's promise and longed for the coming of this singular seed (Galatians 3:16); Abraham's offspring, on the other hand, rejected Him and sought to destroy Him (cf. Matthew 21:1-22:14, 27:11-25). In this way they showed themselves to be sons of a different father: They shared in the likeness of another individual who also was at odds with their genealogical father Abraham and the One they claimed as their covenant Father (8:37-42).

The most astonishing thing about Jesus' indictment is that He directed it toward Jews who'd just professed faith in Him. *They believed in Him, but as sons of the devil who is the father of lies.* Their father orchestrated the first lie by which he fractured the filial relationship between God and His image-son; from that point forward he continued to lie, deceive and kill in order to thwart God's design to reclaim His children. The master of guile, Satan blinded the minds of men to the light that had now come into the world (cf. 1:4-5, 12:23-36; 2 Corinthians 4:1-4). So these Jews were children of the lie and could not recognize the truth as it was embodied in the One speaking to them (8:43-45). They were willing to embrace Him so long as they could conform Him to the "truth" of their false notions. But they couldn't abide Him for who He truly was; darkness has no fellowship with light. Though no one in Israel could convict Jesus of speaking a lie, blindness to the truth compelled them to conclude that He *must* be a liar and deceiver; if He was true, then they were false and that was beyond consideration (8:45-47).

- e. Unable to answer Jesus' charges, these men were forced to discredit Him; the *ad hominem* argument is always the last refuge of desperate men (8:48). And they only strengthened their attack when He responded that His word was true and would deliver from death all who embrace and keep it. In their minds, this only proved that He was demon-possessed because everyone knows that all men die; even God's most holy servants didn't escape the grave. Just who did He think He was that He could keep men from death when even Abraham and the prophets succumbed to it (8:49-53)? He could make such a claim because He was Israel's covenant Lord – the Living One who, as the Logos, covenanted with Abraham and had now come into the world to fulfill His oath to banish death (8:54-58).