

Before Abraham Was Born, I AM

John 8: 21-59

DIG: Jesus said He was **the light of the world** and claimed a special relationship with **the Father** in the previous file. How are they misunderstanding Yeshua now? What is the significance of John 8:30 in light of the total misunderstanding of the Torah-teachers and Pharisees? How do the religious leaders exemplify **darkness** in this scene? What false assumptions confuse the issue of spiritual freedom for **Abraham's** descendants? What issues does Jesus force them to confront (John 8:34-41)? What does Christ say is the ultimate test of who **belongs to God** (Yochanan 8:42-47)? How does the Lord account for their not understanding Him (John 8:37, 43, 45, 47)? What is the critical question raised by His claim in Yochanan 8:24 and 51? How is this issue central to the whole argument in John 7:4 to 8:58? How does Christ use their loyalty to **Abraham** against them? Why does Messiah's final claim cause such outrage?

REFLECT: Of what are you pleased with in your spiritual heritage? In what ways has it been a spiritual handicap? How can you be sure if there is room in your life for His Word? What needs to be cleared out so there is room? Of the four claims Jesus makes in this chapter (John 9 8:12, 32, 51 and 58), which means the most to you right now? Why? From this passage, what might you do for someone who is honestly seeking ADONAI? What in your walk with the Lord might help?

After the interruption by **the Pharisees** who brought the woman caught in adultery to Him, **Jesus** continued to teach. At the end of the teaching **Yochanan** describes a discussion held later, without saying exactly where it took place in the Temple. Yet, it is clear that teaching normally went on either in the Court of the Women (see Nc2 - **The Court of the Women**), or in Solomon's Colonnade (see Nd - **Solomon's Colonnade**). These were the two most appropriate places to address large crowds of people on the Temple Mount.

The Torah-teachers and **the Pharisees** continued to challenge **Jesus'** authority and engaged in open conflict with Him later that morning. It was still **the eighth day** of the festival of Booths (Leviticus 23:36, 39; Numbers 29:35). That day was actually considered to be a separate feast day called *shemini 'atzeret*, which means *festal assembly of the eighth (day)*. It was supposed to be a day of rest with **no regular work**.

The Pharisees accepted Jesus' challenge that He was **the light of the world** (see **Gr - I AM the Light of the World**) and engaged in open conflict with Him. The Lord said to them: **I AM going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come** (John 8:21). Once more Christ repeated His indictment of the Pharisees from John 8:23-26, saying they would never see heaven because they did not know God. And again they took Him literally. This made the Jews ask, "Will He kill Himself? Is that why He says, 'Where I go, you cannot come' (Yochanan 8:22)?" This was a new teaching. Until now Yeshua had not said, "You must **trust** in Me, **believe** in Me, **have faith** in Me (Greek: *pistis*) unless you are prepared to die in your sin." So, Messiah explained His meaning in simple, literal language.

Our Savior displayed the difference between Himself and His adversaries with a pair of contrasts. They were closely tied up with **this world**. First, He continued: **You are from below; I AM from above** (Yochanan 8:23a). **Below** is the realm of fallen creation; whereas, **above** is the heavenly realm in which sin cannot exist. Those born **below** are doomed to **die in their sins** and then suffer eternal **judgment** for their wicked deeds (John 3:3). Those born from **above** are holy and, therefore, are eternally secure in **Jesus Christ** (see **Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**). Yeshua is from above because He is God.

Secondly, He is of a different order. **You are of this world; I AM not of this world** (John 8:23b). They belong to the world where **Satan** is supreme (First John 5:19). It is because of this essential nature of theirs that He said: **I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I AM [He], you will indeed die in your sins** (John 8:24). The Konia Greek is simply *ego eimi*, **I AM**, the classic self-designation of ADONAI.

Hoping that the Nazarene would make some clearer declaration of His messiahship, they asked: **Who are you?** But He avoided their trap and declared: **Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. I have much to say in judgment of you. But He who sent Me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from Him I tell the world.** But the Jewish religious leaders did not understand that He was telling them about His Father (Yochanan 8:25-27). Christ's life validated all that He claimed to be. How could He even speak to them at all? They and He belonged to different worlds and communion was impossible between them. They did not want to understand or receive what He had told them. But the time would soon come when all would be made clear.⁹⁵⁶

So Jesus said: **When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM He.** Messiah is predicting the manner and means of His death on the cross, a prediction He made to Nicodemus perhaps as long as two years ago (John 3:14-15). Then Yeshua

repeated His teaching from the encounter with the Pharisees after healing the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda (Yochanan 5:1-17). **And that I do nothing on My own but speak just what the Father has taught Me** (see my commentary on **Isaiah Ir - Because the Sovereign LORD Helps Me, I Will Set My Face Like a Flint**). **The one who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do what pleases Him** (Yochanan 8:28-29). Being the Master Teacher, our Savior didn't whisper the truth once and move on. He taught the same lessons to many audiences many times over each day at the Temple. These lessons preserved by Yochanan represent the many times in which Messiah became a frequent target for the Pharisees' wrath after proclaiming **the truth**. But John inserts a subtle editorial note to reassure the reader.

While Christ's opposition remained steadfast in their rebellion, even as He spoke, many believed in Him. And to the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said in the hearing of the Pharisees and other nonbelievers: **If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples**. Messiah assured them that belief was not the end of something, as though they had arrived; but a beginning, a birth after which growth must follow. Believers are to be sanctified. They are to continue in obedience even though the cost may be high. As believers order their lives after His **truth**, they will **know the truth** (John 8:30-31). The Greek word for **know** is *ginosko*, one of at least four that Yochanan could have chosen to mean "know." Unlike the others, however, *ginosko* stresses *the understanding* rather than mere sensory observation. It is closely related to the Hebrew word *yada*, which describes the most intimate kind of knowledge. It can be seen in the book of Genesis when the serpent spoke in the Garden: **For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good from evil** (Genesis 3:5).⁹⁵⁷

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (Yochanan 8:32). This has become somewhat of a popular cliché, but **true** nonetheless. It is **the truth** that is bound up in the Person and work of Yeshua ha-Mashiach. It is saving **truth**. It is **the truth** that saves men and women from the darkness of **sin**. Doctor Luke tells us that Jesus fulfilled in His ministry the prophecy that: **He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners . . . to set the captives free** (Luke 4:18).⁹⁵⁸ The Greek word suggests release from **slavery**. The **slavery** Messiah speaks of here is **slavery to sin**.

But, as usual, the Pharisees and Torah-teachers focused on the literal interpretation and answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free" (John 8:33)? Because of their relationship to Abraham, they claimed racial, cultural and moral superiority. **We have never been slaves?** It was punishable by excommunication from the Temple for one Jew to call

another a slave. But what was the reality? Egypt. Assyria. Babylon. Persia. Macedonia. Syria. And Rome! Maybe **they** meant that **they** were never forced to worship a man as a god despite **their** many political masters. It was as if they gestured toward the Temple as if to ask, "What freedom do **we** need that **we** don't already have?"

Then Jesus clarified His statement. He replied: **I tell you the truth, everyone who [habitually practices] sin is a slave to sin.** They might be the chosen people; but morally **they** were enslaved, and were - just as other people - in bondage to **sin.** **Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.** Slaves within the household are not guaranteed a **permanent place in the family.** But the true **son** remains **permanently,** like Isaac. He suggests that if **they** would continue in His **truth,** it would **free** them spiritually. **So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed** (John 8:34-36).

Therefore, there is no longer any condemnation awaiting those who are in union with the Messiah Yeshua. Why? Because the Torah of the Spirit, which produces this union has set me free from the "torah" of sin and death (Romans 8:1-2 CJB). When we have **the life of Christ** within us, we unwittingly bear the image of our heavenly **Father** more than we realize. The point is, **Jesus** saved us by bearing our **sins** upon **Himself,** therefore, **there is no longer any condemnation,** because we are forgiven. **The death He died, He died to sin once for all, but the life He lives, He lives to God** (Romans 6:10; also see Hebrews 9:12). When the Lord died for our sins, how many of our sins were in the future? **They all were!** Therefore, **there is no condemnation for the sins of the past or for the sins of the future** because we are in **Christ** (Ephesians 1:1, 3-4, 7, 9, 11, 13 and 19-20).

Does that mean we never sin? Of course not, but we don't *have* to sin (First John 2:1). Rabbi Sha'ul says: **In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus** (Romans 6:11). It is important to realize that we do not make ourselves **dead to sin** by considering it so; we consider it so because *it is so.* Has **sin** died? Of course not. The power of this **world** is strong and alluring (First John 2:15-17), but when it makes its appeal, we don't have to respond. We do not *have* to sin. **Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh** (Galatians 5:16 NASB). But even when we do sin we are not **condemned.** **You are** no longer living **under** the yoke of the 613 commandments of the Torah, **but under grace** (Romans 6:14).

The only way a person can be **condemned** is to be found without the **Meshiach** at the great White Throne Judgment (see my commentary on **Revelation Fo - The Great White Throne Judgment**). We have already been judged and found innocent because we are in **Christ Jesus,** who took the punishment for our **sins** upon **Himself.** **Now the Lord is the**

Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (Second Corinthians 3:17). Hallelujah, what a Savior! Let's thank Him for **freeing** us from condemnation.⁹⁵⁹

I know that you are Abraham's descendants (at least in a physical sense). But their shared heritage ended there. **Abraham** is the spiritual ancestor of all who place their trust in ADONAI because **He** heard and obeyed **God's Word**. Because **Jesus** is **the Word of God** in human flesh, to reject **Him** is to reject **God**. Consequently, the faithless **Jews** were **descendants** of **Abraham** in name only.⁹⁶⁰ **Yet you are looking for a way to kill Me, because you have no room for My word** (Yochanan 8:37).

This, **Jesus** implied, made them children of **Satan**, the father of lies and the ultimate rebel against **HaShem**. **I AM telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father**. The religious leaders understood **Jesus'** implication that **the Adversary** was their **father**, so they responded: **Abraham is our father** (John 8:38-39a). They knew that **Abraham** was called, "The friend of God," so the **Jews** implied that because they were **Abraham's** descendants, they were also friends of **God**. The **Lord** counters with the fact spiritual fruit points more to the condition of the heart - much more than mere ancestry. **Luke** would later say it this way: **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance**. And do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I tell you out of these stones **God** can rise up children of Abraham (Luke 3:8; also see Romans 9:6 and James 2:18b-24).

If you were Abraham's children, said **Jesus**, **then you would do what Abraham did**. Rather than repentance, **His** indictment of them provoked hatred. **As it is, you are looking for a way to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father, the devil** (John 8:39b-41a). In seeking to kill **Yeshua**, which they did not deny, the religious leaders were showing their true origin. They completely understood what **Jesus** was saying. Stung with this accusation, their reply continued to prove the **Lord's** point.

With a not so subtle insult, clearly aimed at the assumption that **Jesus** was a counterfeit **Messiah**, they protested: **We are not illegitimate children. The only Father we have is God Himself** (John 8:41b). **Yeshua** overlooked this slur, just as **He** had the previous one (John 8:19), to reinforce **His** earlier teaching that **He** was on earth do to **His Father's** will.

Having invited the **Pharisees** to **believe** in ADONAI as their ancestor as **Abraham** had done, and having felt the sting of their insult, **Jesus** exposed the source of their unbelief - **the ancient Serpent**. **Jesus** said to them: **If God were your Father** (as **He** is not), **you**

would love Me (as you do not). Messiah finds evidence of this in their attitude about Him: For I have come here from God (the tense points to a moment in time, in other words, His birth to Mary). I have not come on My own . . . God sent Me (Yochanan 8:42).

Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to [spiritually discern] what I say. They were so blinded in their belief that the Messiah would not only believe in the Oral Law, but would participate in the making of new Oral Laws (see Ei - The Oral Law), that they could not see the Truth standing before them. Because of their lack of faith, what Jesus had previously hinted at, He now spells out in language so plain that even they could understand. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. This is the reason they did not believe Jesus when He spoke the truth to them. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me (John 8:43-45)!

Now the Son of God challenges them: Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I AM telling the truth, why don't you believe Me? The conclusion was clear; because they were not hearing, they were not from God. For whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God (John 8:46-47). The challenge of His sinless life was before them. They could find no flaw in Him. He only spoke the truth. Consequently, if they were the children of God they would believe in Him. The one who is of divine origin is ready to hear divine things. With irrefutable logic, Jesus drove them into a corner. They were of the earth and of the tempter - not of God.⁹⁶¹

John had a view of the universe that was sharply divided between light and dark, truth and lie, life and death, the kingdom of God and the world. For him, there was no compromise (First John 1:5-7). It is especially evident here. Satan is everything ADONAI is not, and to have a lifestyle of unrepentant sin is to side with the Enemy of souls against the King of kings. The plain and simple reason for the Pharisees' rejection of Messiah, the Word of God, was their dedication to the father of lies. This was a terrible indictment.

John the Baptizer had called them a brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7b); Christ said that they belonged to their father, the devil. Filled with rage and fury, they hiss back: Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed (John 8:48)? He was speaking evil of the "chosen people" as the Samaritans did. These were two of the most degrading things one Jew could say to another. Jesus chooses to ignore the Samaritan comment, but calmly replied: I AM not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, but I honor My Father and you dishonor Me. The Son is dedicated to the will of the Father, which, of

course, is as far removed from demon possession as is possible. **I AM not seeking glory for Myself; but there is One who seeks it, and He is the Judge** (Yochanan 8:49-50). Therefore, Jesus is saying that He gives honor where it is due while they do not. This failure on their part is the reason why they are so far from Him.

Yochanan then brings this confrontation to a resounding climax - the claim of Jesus' deity. Christ had just pointed out the fearful consequence of rejecting Him and His Word - there was One who would judge them (see my commentary on Revelation Fn - **The Second Resurrection**). Now in sharp contrast from the doom awaiting those who reject Him, Messiah now declares: **I tell you the truth, whoever obeys My Word will never see death**. At this they laughed at Him, and with venom on their lips they exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys Your word will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are" (John 8:51-53)?

In the final analysis, Jesus laid His ax against the foot of their prideful rebellion. Jesus, though equal with the Father, did not seek His own glory, but did everything to glorify the Father. He replied: **If I glorify Myself, My glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the One who glorifies Me. Though you do not know Him, I know Him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know Him and obey His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad** (John 8:54-56). The religious leaders of Jerusalem, the dedicated guardians of the Scriptures, witnessed the life and deeds of Yeshua, but failed to recognize the Living Word when He stared them in the face (one can only imagine their horror when they died and ended up standing before Him once again, only this time in judgment). But preoccupied with every yud and stroke (see Dg - **The Completion of the Torah**), they could not connect the obvious dots. In frustration, they exclaimed, "You are not yet fifty years old," they said to Him, "and You have seen Abraham" (Yochanan 8:57)!"

I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I AM (John 8:58)! Claiming to be God and, specifically, pronouncing God's name (as Yeshua had just done) were punishable by death (Leviticus 24:15-16 and Mishna Sanhedrin 7:5, "The blasphemer is not guilty until he pronounces HaShem, or the Name").⁹⁶² There might be some today that are confused about Jesus' claim of being God. But there was no such confusion from the members of the Great Sanhedrin of His day.

At this, the religious leaders were incensed and picked up stones to stone Him. But in the confusion, Christ slipped away and passed into the midst of those who were His friends in the crowd and quietly but boldly came out from the Temple grounds (John 8:59). Jesus understood better than anyone else the price for speaking and living the truth. Matthew made an especially shocking statement by Yeshua: **Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the Land. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Mt 10:34)**. The purpose of a sword is to divide. Physically, it separates one part of the body from another. Figuratively, **the sword of truth** is so sharp that it can slide between the imaginary bond of soul and spirit to lay bare the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). And socially, the sword separates groups into two categories; it attracts those who will surrender and provokes violence for those who will not. There is no room for compromise when standing before the gleaming sword of truth. Surrender or fight.

Jesus brought **the sword of truth** into the Temple during the festival of Booths. Some surrendered. However, others began a futile, exhausting, self-destructive fight. Their response is a study in the six stages of rejection. First was **contradiction**: Your testimony is not true (Yochanan 8:12b-13); secondly, **cynicism**: Where is your father? We are not illegitimate children (John 8:19a and 41b); thirdly, **denial**: We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone (Yochanan 8:33a); fourthly **insult**: You are a Samaritan and demon-possessed (John 8:48); fifthly **sarcasm**: Who do you think you are (Yochanan 8:53); which leads to **violence**: and they picked up stones to stone Him (John 8:59a).⁹⁶³

The rabbis called stoning "death by the hand of God" but, ironically, it was actually in the hands of the people, who might administer "the rebels beating" on the spot without trial if anyone were caught openly defying of some positive teaching, whether from the Torah or the Oral Law. **The rebels beating** was until death. On another occasion the people picked up stones in the Temple to stone Him (John 10:31). What happened to Jesus in Nazareth is a microcosm of the nation of Isra'el as a whole; what happens to locally will eventually happen nationally. It is a remarkable fact that, when Messiah and His martyr Stephen were before the Sanhedrin, their "trials" were a direct contradiction to all of their own self-imposed "rules" (see Lh - **The Laws of the Great Sanhedrin Regarding Trials**).⁹⁶⁴

Five reasons why people reject Jesus. Why do people reject the Messiah? His encounters with the religious leaders in Yerushalayim point us to at least five reasons.

1. A lack of knowledge (Yochanan 8:14). Some people do not accept Yeshua as the Meshiach because they do not have adequate information about Him because they have refused to see what has been made plain to them (Romans 1:18-32), or what they have been told is wrong. This is why the Gospel needs to be taken around the world.

2. A lack of perception (John 8:15 and 23). The religious experts judged by human standards; that is, they perceived in only natural, physical, or observable terms. They lacked a spiritual dimension to their thinking, which prevented them from discerning spiritual truths. Some people reject Messiah for the same reasons. This is not only lack of knowledge. This is a choice to reject the reality of anything supernatural. Thus, spiritual truths have no more meaning to them than the color red has to a person born blind.

3. A lack of appropriation (Yochanan 8:37). The Torah-teachers and the Pharisees had been exposed to the Word of God because it was their job to copy the manuscripts, learn the principles they conveyed, and apply them to everyday life. Israel had been founded on the Torah. But the religious leaders never fully allowed the words on the page to make the journey into their hearts. They failed to apply what they supposedly cherished.

The truth of Jesus Christ can be studied, and yet, never applied. In Kalinovka, Russia, attendance at Sunday school picked up after the priest started handing out candy to the peasant children. One of the most faithful was a pug-nosed, pugnacious lad who recited the Scriptures with due piety, pocketed the reward, and then fled into the fields to munch it. The priest took a liking to the boy, and persuaded him to attend church school. By offering other inducements the priest managed to teach the boy the four Gospels. He won a special prize for memorizing all four by heart and reciting them nonstop in church. Sixty years later, he could still recite all the Gospels verbatim. Today, his soul is probably in Sheol, but his body lies in the cold hard ground under a marker bearing the name: Nikita Khrushchev.

4. A lack of desire (John 8:44). The religious leaders followed the desires of their own fallen natures rather than obeying ADONAI. Some people just love their sin more than they love God, regardless of how it destroys their lives. Drug addicts will never choose sobriety as long as they can get their fix; only when they come to hate their dependence will they try to end it. The same can be said of wealth, entertainment, or illicit relationships.

5. A lack of humility (Yochanan 8:52-53). Pharisaic Judaism had lost their sense of humility. They thought their ancestry guaranteed them **God's** approval. Not only that, they believed their religious knowledge and activity gave them exclusive access to the truth. Children of great, godly parents. Members of high standing in some Christian organization. Religious officials. Denominational authorities. Graduates of fine institutions of higher learning. None will enter heaven without first setting aside pride long enough to receive **God's** grace. But to receive grace, we must first recognize our hopelessness without it. It requires humility to acknowledge the extent of our own sin.⁹⁶⁵

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, I thank **You** for sending **Your Son** to take my place on the Cross. I choose to believe **the truth** that **there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**. I thank **You** for disciplining me as **Your** child so I may bear the fruit of righteousness. I believe **the truth: There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear had to do with punishment (1 John 4:18)**. I know that **You** are not punishing me when **You** discipline me, because **You** love me. I renounce the lies of **Satan** that I am still subject to the laws of sin and death. I accept my responsibility to **walk in the light (1 Jn 1:7)**, and I ask **You** to show me the times I have walked according to the flesh. I confess these times to **You**, and I thank **You** for **Your** forgiveness and cleansing. I now ask **You** to fill me with **Your Holy Spirit** that I may walk according to **Him**. In **Jesus** precious name I pray. Amen.⁹⁶⁶*