



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 8: 48-59

Summer 2022

"The Eternal I AM"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Gospel of John and this morning we're going to finish up chapter 8 beginning with verse 48. Jesus has been in a contentious discussion with some of the Pharisees there in the temple and it continues now—and comes to its conclusion. Verse 48,

⁴⁸ The Jews answered and said to Him, “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. ⁵⁰ But I do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death.” ⁵² 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.’ ⁵³ Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out *to be*?” ⁵⁴ 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’; ⁵⁵ 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. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad.” ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” ⁵⁹ Therefore

they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

John 8: 48-59

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word. May the LORD bless our time of study and worship together in it.

(Message) Children sometimes ask, 'Who made God?' And the clearest answer, the correct answer is, 'God never needed to be made because He was always there.'

He is completely different from us. We are His creatures. We are made. We are finite, fragile, and dependent. He is our maker, eternal and self-sustaining and as the psalmist put it in Psalm 90, verse 2, "From everlasting to everlasting, You are God." He simply is—and always has been—and always will be.

For that reason, Jesus' statement at the end of John 8 is significant. He said, "...before Abraham was born, I am." (vs58). It's those two words, "I am", that are significant. They mean much more than He existed before Abraham, (after all, angels existed before Abraham). They mean that 'He always existed.' There was not a time when He was not. He is uncreated and eternal.

And that's the basis of a life of faith because it means He is independent of all things. He can never be frustrated by people or events so His word is absolutely reliable and we can trust in Him unreservedly. He is the eternal "I AM".

That statement and claim ended the conversation of chapter 8, which divided the crowd between many who came to believe in Jesus, and many, (probably most there), who didn't and opposed Him. They were angry because Jesus challenged their security. They claimed to be free but Jesus said they weren't free—that they were slaves. They said 'Abraham was their father'—and He said, 'Their deeds proved that their father was the devil.' So at this stage in the discussion they did what people often do when their

arguments are weak, or their arguments fail, they resorted to a personal attack. They called Him a Samaritan, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan...?" (vs48).

We met the Samaritans back in chapter 4 with the woman at the well. They were rivals of the Jews and considered by the Jewish people to be spiritual renegades, heretics, and half-breeds. The Samaritans made the same accusation against the Jews, and said that they, (the Jews), were not the descendants of Seth, Adam's righteous son, but descendants of Cain, who's real father was the devil.

So when Jesus disputed that these Jews were exclusively Abraham's children, it seemed to them that He was taking the side of the Samaritans—that He was using their accusation against them and that seemed to them, very clearly, to betray His people. In fact, it was so unprecedented in the minds of these Jewish men, (and in their minds so despicable), that they could only explain it by demon possession, "...You are a Samaritan and have a demon." (vs48b).

So Jesus responded: He denied the charge; 'There was nothing heretical or devilish' about Him. And the proof of that was in His motives and ministry for He honored God and saw His glory.

But He wasn't concerned about their opinions of Him or His reputation. He trusted in His Father to take care of that, "I do not seek My glory;..." He said, "...there is One who seeks and judges." (vs50). He judges all things and judges them thoroughly and correctly. God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, searches the hearts of men and renders a final verdict. And really that is the only verdict that counts—not the opinions of men.

And so the Lord didn't care about pleasing men—or these men. And I don't mean by that that He was a tactless individual; He was not. He was the wisest man to ever live; He understood human relations; He was sensitive and sensible in all of His responses to people. But He honored God first and foremost—and honored the truth above all things.

And that is real wisdom. We can always count on that, on honoring God first, because the LORD said, "Those who honor Me, I will honor." (2 Sam 2:30).

Now that honor may not come immediately, but it will come. It will come later and in the end, He will vindicate all of those who stand for Him and He will make everything right.

With that confidence, the Lord brushed aside the insult and continued to speak the truth. He had not come into the world to defend Himself, or promote Himself, but to save sinners. And so in verse 51, Jesus returned to that message, and did so with a lot of emphasis on its importance. He began, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death." What a magnificent promise! Those who keep His Word will escape the king of terrors—they will never see death.

Now obviously that is not a promise of escape from physical death. The Lord and His apostles all suffered death; and I've done a lot of Christian funerals. His statement was based on the idea that there are two deaths, 'the first death' and 'the second death'—physical death and spiritual death, (eternal death). And it's the second death that He referred to.

And in making this great promise contingent, or conditional, He was putting the crowd on notice. He said, "If anyone keeps My word." So the promise of life and escaping judgment is for 'keepers', 'keeps His word'. It's believing in; it's clinging to His word. It is observing and hoping in it. It is persevering in the Gospel, which is to say it's persevering in faith. Calvin said, "It is keeping it as a precious treasure." Now that's genuine, living faith.

Those who don't, those who reject His Word, shut themselves out from the greatest of promises. But it's not a promise designed to shut people out: It's a very generous promise; it's an inclusive offer. He made it to anyone who 'keeps His word', every believer.—Which opens up the promise to all kinds of people, Jews as well as Samaritans and Gentiles; 'whosoever' they may be.

Your faith may be weak, your understanding may be small, your sin may be great—so often that is the condition of those who come to faith in Christ, who come to Him. And if you seek Him, you will find Him. If you trust in Christ, you will be received and never see death, the second death.

As I say, it's a great promise; there's no greater promise. But for the rest of the chapter, the Lord gives His authority for saying it because His Jewish antagonists disputed it immediately.

And once again, as they did so, they fell into the mistake of interpreting His words literally, ("...keeps My word he will never see *death*"), as referring to physical death—and therefore rejected His statement as completely absurd. They stated, "Abraham died, and the prophets *also*". (vs52). In other words, 'All these great saints heard God's word; they believed it, obeyed it, and faithfully kept it—and as prophets, delivered it to others...and yet they all died.'

Now if God's Word didn't preserve those men from physical death, how can Jesus' Word do that? 'It can't', they were saying. In fact, the fact that He would claim that it could showed that He was delusional—that He was demonic. It's very similar to the statement of the Pharisees in Matthew 12, verse 24, 'He casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul.'" (or *Beelzebub*).

The natural man can't explain Christ. When he tries, he either blasphemes or he's illogical. And we see they're very illogical here: They dismiss the Lord's statement as self-promotion, which He denied in verse 54. Self-glory is vanity; He wasn't attempting that. The only glory that matters is the glory and honor that God gives us. And He said, in fact, that 'God did glorify Him'. In fact, He said, 'God is His Father'.

And He added, in verse 55, "I know Him", and the reason that they did not honor Him, (did not honor Christ and believe in Him), is because they 'did not know the Father'—the God they claimed was their God. Now that was truly absurd to them. And further, Jesus added in verse 56, that Abraham, (whom they claimed was their father), "...rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad."

Now that must have been a shocking statement to them who based their confidence in the matter of salvation, their relationship to God, and their security in that relationship in that future—they based all of that on their relationship to Abraham. "We are Abraham's descendants," they said earlier. God promised to bless Abraham, and

since they were his descendants, God's blessing was on them as well. That was their security. That's what they really based it all on.

Now Jesus had acknowledged in verse 37 that they were Abraham's descendants that they were his physical descendants. There's no argument about that. He didn't foster the Samaritan myth about the origin of the Jews. What the Lord denied was the Jewish myth of 'security from heredity'. The Jews had advantages; great, great advantages, but no guarantees of eternal life due to Abraham.

'Hereditary religion' is false security. No one inherits faith from their parents—or anyone. In fact, their father Abraham was a witness to Jesus: 'He saw My day', Jesus said. Abraham saw His coming; His work of salvation; His sacrificial death and resurrection. He saw it and rejoiced in it; was overjoyed by it because that's where Abraham's confidence was. But their confidence was in Abraham and it was a false confidence. Abraham's confidence was not in himself, it was in the Lord Himself; it was in Christ, in God's sovereign grace.

Now the natural questions are, 'Well, okay, when did Abraham see Christ's day? And how did he see it?' Jesus seemed to suggest a specific moment when it happened but He didn't define it for us. So there have been a lot of suggestions to answer that. One is that it happens in heaven. In other words, right now, 'he sees Jesus' day' and he sees what the Lord is doing—and 'he rejoices in it.'

But that's in the *present* and the Lord stated it was in the *past*, meaning it was in Abraham's lifetime when 'he saw it and rejoiced'. So others have looked to some event, or a vision of Abraham's to explain this. In Genesis 12, for example, verse 3, when Abraham was given the promise that 'In him all the families of the earth would be blessed', he rejoiced in the prospect that the Messiah was going to be born as one of his descendants.

Another suggestion is from Genesis 15: When the covenant was made with him and he looked up at the stars of heaven and saw in that, the future of Israel and the

multitude that would be born as a result of him—he saw in that the coming of the Messiah and “rejoiced” in it.

That's all possible. Those are possible examples because the Lord doesn't specify when it occurred. But it may be significant that He did not do that, (that He didn't refer to a particular event), and what He meant was that Abraham's general attitude was one of rejoicing in the hope of Christ. It was the hope of all Old Testament saints. Adam and Eve left the garden with the hope, with the promise of a ‘Deliverer’ to come, ‘who would crush the head of the serpent’. That was the first Gospel given in Genesis chapter 3, verse 15. Job expressed the confidence that, his “Redeemer lives”; and at the last day, “...will take His stand on the earth.”, (Job 19, verse 25). In John 12, verse 41, it states that Isaiah, ‘saw Christ's glory’, “and he spoke of Him”.

Christ was the hope of the Old Testament believer. Abraham had that hope from the outset of his life as a believer—and He grew in his understanding of it of course. And the Old Testament believers had a rudimentary understanding of these things but it was a genuine understanding—and they grew in it. And certainly Abraham grew in his understanding of it for he lived his life of faith with the hope of Christ before him and rejoicing in it.

And so, by rejecting Jesus these Jews were not following Abraham in whom they had put all their confidence—or the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Micah, (who prophesied the birth of God in Bethlehem, Micah 5, verse 2). In fact, the Lord made that point forcefully when He said, "Your father Abraham...", (the one in whom you claim your security, the one who you claim as your great ancestor; he), “...rejoiced to see My day.” (vs56).

Yet again, though, the Jews misunderstood the Lord's statement. They interpreted it as a claim to have been a contemporary with Abraham. He had not claimed that; He had not said that He had seen Abraham and He had not said that ‘Abraham had seen Him in the flesh’, as a man—but that Abraham ‘had seen His day.’

But they said, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" (vs57). The 'fifty years old' estimate of His age is a round number. He was less than that, about thirty-three years of age. But the point was, He was not even half a century old and He claimed that He had seen Abraham, who had died two millennia before.

The Lord's response is one of those great moments of revelation. Rather than directly correct their mistake, He gave an answer that did much more than correct; it enlightens. With that solemn introduction He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." (vs58).

They got the point because with that, verse 59 states, "...they picked up stones to throw at Him..." It was those simple two words, "I AM", that provoked them to anger. They considered Him a blasphemer worthy of death because they recognized in that statement a claim to deity. That would not have been true if He had said, 'Before Abraham was born I was.' That would indicate preexistence to Abraham; but again, that could simply be the existence of an angel—perhaps He was claiming that.

This is more than that. Jesus spoke in the present tense, "I AM", indicating that He transcends time and was claiming an eternal preexistence—existing always before time and space.

But that alone was not the reason for the Jews' outrage. They recognized immediately that by using the words "I AM", He was using the name of God and applying it to Himself. It was the name that God used when He revealed Himself to Moses out of the burning bush. We've considered this expression a number of times already in connection with the Lord's 'I am statements' in the Gospel of John: "I am the bread of life." "I am the Light of the world." And there'll be others that come.

But here it is especially important because the Lord used this expression, this 'I am statement' in an absolute sense. He said in effect, 'I am the I AM'; 'I AM the very one who spoke to Moses and revealed Himself in that way.'

Moses approached the burning bush while he was shepherding sheep out in the desert. And God said there that, 'He had heard the cry of the sons of Israel and He was sending Moses back to Egypt to deliver them from slavery.' So Moses asked, 'When I come to the Children of Israel and say to them', "The God of your fathers has sent me to you" and they say to me, " 'What is His name?' 'What shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, "I AM Who I AM...Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' " (Ex 3:13-14).

The name *Yahweh*, or *Jehovah*, comes from those words, *I AM*. And Jesus was applying them to Himself. He was laying claim to being the One who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Now He was not claiming to be God the Father, but God the Son. He is distinct from the Father in His person but He's equal to the Father in His essence, power, and glory.

This is the doctrine of the Trinity, that there is one God who exists in three Persons. The Father sent the Son, the Son prays to the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both of them. Each person is distinct from the other, but each One partakes of the full divine essence—"The stuff of deity", as someone called it. And that is what Jesus indicated here.

Later He will say, "I and the Father are one." (Jn 10:30). He's fully God, One in essence with the Father; God the Son, the eternal Son, who became a man. And Abraham looked forward to that day, looked forward to Him becoming a man—and to His birth and ministry. But as God, He existed before Abraham, existed before the worlds were made. As the psalmist said, "From everlasting to everlasting, You are God." (Ps 90:2) —the eternal Son of God.

And He must be in order for us to have a Savior. Only God can save us from our sins. The stain of sin is so deep that only God can move it. Only He can remove that sin, remove those sins, separate them "As far as the east is from the west," (Ps 103: 12). Only He can cleanse us.

Because He is God, He is from everlasting to everlasting. The eternal God, without beginning or end. He is self-existent, self-sustaining. And there's an indication of that, an illustration of it, from the burning bush itself. Moses called it "this marvelous sight" when he sees it. (Ex 3:3). And it was marvelous and caught his attention, riveted his attention to it, because he saw that the bush was burning—and "yet the bush was not consumed." That was a very curious sight to him, so he went to investigate, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." (Ex 3:3).

It didn't burn up because the flame was not dependent on the bush for fuel. It was a self-sustaining fire; it burned independently—and that signified God's self-existence. It illustrated the kind of God He is: He is self-sufficient, self-existent, separated from the universe, unaffected by the world—and yet sustaining the universe by the Word of His power and holding it all together. That's how Paul will describe the Lord Jesus in Colossians chapter 1, verse 17; 'He holds everything together.' He created it all and holds it all together—though nothing holds Him together but Himself. He has life in Himself. He is eternal, without beginning or end. All of that is what Jesus was saying in those two words, "I AM".

Theologians have one word for it, *aseity*—which is combination of two Latin words that means, 'from Himself', or 'self-existence.' It's not important that you know that word; but what is important is that you understand what it means—and what the Lord indicated here about God: Himself as God, God the Son. He exists of Himself; we do not. We are dependent creatures—He is not.

A number of years ago I read a book titled *How We Die*, by a physician, Dr. Sherwin Nuland, who was a surgeon and taught at the Yale School of Medicine. It's not a Christian book; Dr. Nuland was agnostic and so there's nothing hopeful in the book. But there was a statement in it that impressed me, probably because it was, 1. unusual, and yet, 2. so obvious. He began a chapter with this quotation, "Man is an obligate aerobe."

An aerobe is any organism that cannot survive without oxygen. Oxygen is necessary for us. We die quickly without it. Fire dies without oxygen. But the fire in the

bush didn't need oxygen; or the bush for fuel. It burned independently; it was self-existent. The energy was from itself—as God's life is from Himself.

Humans depend on oxygen, sunshine, good climate, nourishment, companionship—on an unending list of things for our survival. Every moment of life is precarious, risky, perilous.

But as sons of God and children of God, we are joined to the eternal Triune God who depends on nothing. He cannot be deprived; or in any need of help; and Who, therefore, cannot be frustrated or fail. God isn't an 'obligate' anything. And that's the basis of our confidence in life. He is our rock, unshakable and completely reliable.

I've heard that word *rock* used a couple of times—well, numerous times this week, of Elizabeth II. And I think she was probably rightfully described in that way as, "A Rock." She was steady and reliable in all the vicissitudes of her reign of 70 years and was a great example to the English people.

But she died; and I thought of Robert Murray McCheyne and was reminded of something he wrote. McCheyne had an older brother, David. At a young age, David became a believer and he had a great influence on Robert, who admired his brother. But at a young age, David died. And McCheyne wrote in a letter, he said, "This day eleven years ago I lost my love and loving brother—and began to seek a brother who cannot die." That's Christ.

So this subject of *aseity*, of the Lord's self-existence, is not merely a curious topic of arcane theology but a completely practical matter that we need to understand if we are to live well; if we're to live faithfully. We "walk by faith, not by sight." (2Cor 5:7), Paul told the Corinthians; which means we live each day, each moment trusting in the Word of God: Not trusting the things that we can see or how we can calculate things are going to be—but trusting in the Word of God.

We're walking blindly; everyone is. You cannot see the next second before your life; and you don't know what it holds. We don't even know if this sermon will come to an end, (I mean the end that I planned. *[Laughter]*). We can't see before us; so we live by

faith. We live by faith in God's Word, trusting it moment by moment, the Scriptures and the promises of God.

But the only way we can do that is if we believe in it. And the only way we can believe in it reliably, is if we believe in a big God, an infinite God without limitations. The only limitation He has is His inability to fail. The only limitation He has is the truth—He cannot fail to tell the truth. He cannot lie; He cannot deny Himself; He cannot break His promises. Knowing that, and believing that, is necessary for our spiritual health.

And it's revelation of the I AM that is the basis of that confidence. Nothing can keep Him from keeping His promises to us: From giving us our daily bread to raising us from the dead. From the ordinary to the extraordinary, He is able and He is faithful. Believing that puts steel in our resolve to follow Him daily, faithfully, and trust in His Word—and trust in Him in our dying moments.

You want to be faithful to the LORD until your dying day. —And in your dying day...fill your mind with His Word, His truth. It sanctifies and changes us and strengthens us.

This final statement of this long conversation Jesus had in the temple is a significant and glorious revelation. There really is no greater revelation than this in John 8, verse 58. Jesus is the eternal I AM. The promise of the ages, the promise of Isaiah 7:14, "God with us", has been fulfilled. God the Son became a man and solved the sin problem; to give eternal life to all who believe in Him. He continues with us at every moment of our life to ensure safety and security in a world of insecurity—where every moment and everyplace has hidden dangers. We can rest and rely on Him. That's the revelation He gave and the encouragement of it in the statement, "I AM". And those who were disputing with Him got the sense of it; they understood it was a claim to deity.

But it didn't comfort them—it enraged them and, "...they picked up stones to throw at Him..." (vs59). They had had murder in their hearts; and now they decided to act on it. "...but," John continued, "Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.", (vs59b), and murder was avoided. As Whitefield said, "We are immortal till our work is

done." His work was not done. He had much more to reveal—great chapters are still before us in this glorious Gospel, (and His great work of the cross was still before Him.)

But those words, "Jesus hid Himself," are, I think, like many of the statements in John's Gospel, layered with meaning. Obviously, He was protected at that dangerous moment; and that's an encouragement to us. He who hid Himself can hide us for protection.

In his book, *The Mystery of Providence*, John Flavel told how God delivered a minister, a Huguenot, in France from his persecutors. A spider, by weaving her web over the mouth of an oven, hid the Lord's servant from his enemy—it's an amazing little story. The God who appointed a great fish to swallow His prophet Jonah, appointed a little bug to weave a web that would hide him from his persecutors. That's encouraging.

But this statement, "Jesus hid Himself", should also be disturbing. Those men responded to His revelation of blessing with unbelief—with hostile unbelief. They willfully rejected Him and He responded to them by hiding Himself. Listen, it's a terrible thing for the Son of God, the Light of the world in whom is grace and truth, to hide Himself from a person and to leave him or her in darkness; without a remedy, without help—abandoned to judgment.

These descendants of Abraham were still slaves to sin, still spiritually blind to their self-righteousness and were lost men. And the only one who could find them and free them was Christ, who had hidden Himself from them. That is judgment.

If you're here without Christ, without having believed in Him, you have heard the same message those men heard in the temple. Don't reject it as they did. This is an opportunity to come to the Light of the world to receive forgiveness and life everlasting—to believe in Him as God's Son and man's Savior, lest the opportunity end and He hides Himself from you.

And you who have believed, be encouraged. On the basis of Christ's sacrificial death for us we are accepted fully by God almighty, the Triune God—and we are secure now and forever. And so in light of that, may we live carefully and confidently; and live to His honor and glory: 'He honors those who honor Him.'

We thank You, Father, for the sacrifice of which we have just sung: We sang praise to You for it and for the great truth that everyone who has put his or her faith in the finished work of Christ, (the blood of Christ shed for sinners), is now hid within Him, and we are secure. What a great truth that is. Thank You.

We know that's true because Your Word teaches it. And we know it's true because Your Word cannot be in error. You are perfect and pure. You are holy, You are separate, You are not dependent on anything, and all that You say is true, and You keep Your Word. So we praise You and thank You for the great promises we have and the assurance we have; that every believer in Christ joined to Him is secure.

So thank You Father. Bless us as we seek to serve You in all that we do, in every area of life that we are in. And we pray that You would bless us.

We now pray as Arron blessed Your people:

The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

(End of Audio)