

Chapter 17: The Light of Jesus

John 7:53–8:29

As the division among the people surrounding Jesus continues to grow, the discussion naturally turns to the stakes of belief one way or another. If Jesus is nothing more than a crackpot, there is no consequence for dismissing him and even for putting him to death for the blasphemy of his claims. On the other hand, if Jesus is the true representative of the Father, then the stakes rise considerably. If Jesus is faithfully revealing the message and even the *person* of the Father, then rejecting Jesus is tantamount with rejecting the Father himself. Is Jesus a false witness, unable to back up his testimony beyond his own delusional thoughts, or is Jesus the light of the world, giving the light of life to those who follow him? Furthermore, how can we know the truth, one way or another? Although Jesus gives many proofs to back up his claims, *God's light gives life and indicts darkness most clearly at the cross.*

The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11)

The main passage we will explore in this chapter is the Light of the World discourse in John 8:12–29. Many ancient manuscripts, however, insert another passage from John 7:53–8:11 about Jesus' interaction with a woman caught in adultery, despite an abundance of evidence that demonstrates that the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53–8:11 was almost certainly not part of the original manuscripts of the Gospel of John. To start, the earliest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of John do not contain the story.¹ Also, the earliest church Fathers skip right over this story in the commentaries.² In fact, in the Greek-speaking churches, we find no mention of this passage until the twelfth century,³ while the story was incorporated into the Latin manuscripts from much earlier on.⁴ Even the vocabulary used in the passage does not align with John's vocabulary, and some manuscripts even insert this story in another Gospel altogether, following Luke 21:38.⁵ The evidence is "overwhelming" that this story was not original to the Gospel of John.⁶

If John did not include this story in his Gospel, what should we do with it? Biblical commentators typically take one of two approaches. Some, such as R. C. H. Lenski, argue that this is a later addition to the Gospel of John, so he offers no exposition at all of the passage—even though he acknowledges that this story most likely records for us an actual event from the life of Jesus.⁷ Others, such as John Calvin, admit that this story was not original to John's Gospel but nevertheless seek to profit from it: "But as it has always been received by the Latin Churches, and is found in many old Greek manuscripts, and contains nothing unworthy of an Apostolic Spirit, there is no reason why we should refuse to apply it to our advantage."⁸ Both perspectives have merit.

In regard to the public preaching of God's word, Lenski's approach is correct. From the pulpit, a pastor has no right to preach from what he judges to be edifying stories, whether from this later addition into the Gospel of John, or from the books known as the Apocrypha, or from any other

non-canonical material. We believe that God's word is uniquely contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, and pastors are bound to declare only God's word in the gathered assembly of God's people. In public preaching, God's own word is the power of God unto salvation; therefore, if this story about the woman caught in adultery is not the word of God (since it was not a part of the original autographs of this Gospel, nor was it received universally by the entire church throughout the centuries), we cannot offer any exposition from John 7:53–8:11 in our preaching.

In writing, however, we are not bound in the same way as we are in public worship. Although almost no one believes that this passage was original to John, almost everyone believes that this story preserves something that really happened in the life of Christ. We can—and should—seek to learn something from this passage, although we must remain tentative in our conclusions because of our lower degree of certainty about the details of this passage. To read this passage, then, is to like reading a good book about Jesus. We can find help from what we read here, but we must take what we glean from this extra-biblical passage and compare it to what the Scriptures actually teach about Jesus. From this perspective, John Calvin's approach has value to direct us to write a few things about this passage before shifting our attention to God's word in John 8:12–29.

In this story, Jesus is teaching the people "sitting" (John 8:2) in a rabbi's seat. Interrupting Jesus' teaching, the scribes and Pharisees bring him a woman caught in the very act of adulterer (John 8:3) and point out that the law requires that she be stoned (John 8:4–5). Then, they ask, "So what do you say" (John 8:5). Importantly, the law actually requires that *both* the man and the woman caught in the act of adultery be stoned (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). These people, therefore, are not actually interested in what the law says. They only want to test Jesus so that they might bring a charge against him (John 8:6a). If Jesus declines to prosecute the woman's execution, he fails to uphold the law; however, if he presses for her execution, then he would run afoul of the Roman authorities, for the Jews were not permitted to execute anyone apart from the Roman legal process (cf. John 18:31). Just as when the Jews tested him about paying taxes to Caesar (Matt. 22:15–22), their question was intended to force Jesus into a dilemma of betraying his people or violating the law of the Romans.⁹ The Jewish leaders then expected that whoever Jesus offended would rise up against him, doing their dirty work for them.

Characteristically when Jesus' enemies attempt to trick him, Jesus refuses to take the terms of his challenge. Although exegetes have offered a variety of intriguing possibilities about what Jesus might have been writing in the dirt (John 8:6b), the text does not give any details, so all we know for sure is that Jesus answering their question directly.¹⁰ When they continue to press him to answer, he then stands up and says, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7), and then he bends back down to write in the dirt (John 8:8). Just as when Jesus points out Caesar's image on the coin and tells the Jews to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Matt. 22:21), Jesus here affirms both sides of the dilemma. Yes, the law requires the woman to be stoned, but these Pharisees care nothing about the woman or even about the law, so Jesus turns the weapon of the law back on the woman's accusers and waits for them to disqualify themselves, starting with the oldest (John 8:9). Then, when no one remains to condemn the woman, Jesus does not condemn her either, and tells her to go and sin no more (John 8:11).

This story illustrates two basic principles that align with what we find elsewhere in the Gospels. First, Jesus models the reluctance to cast his pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6). The Jews attempt to trick Jesus at many points, so Jesus' key strategies are first to ignore them, and then to reject their terms

and their assumptions. He did not come to vindicate himself or to act as judge (at least, not during his first coming), so he does not feel the need to defend himself at every point. He is content to remain silent when speaking would do more harm than good by the way his words would be twisted in the moment. Second, this passage teaches nothing about Jesus' attitudes toward adultery, so we should be careful about reading too much into this story about what Jesus might say to struggling with sexual sin today. Instead, we see Jesus reacting to the attitudes of those who would seek to use the law to destroy him. Here, as at every similar point in the Gospels, Jesus sees God's law as the blueprint for loving God and loving people, not as a weapon to uphold personal power at the expense of God and of people. Third, Jesus here illustrates the limitations of the law. It is not that the law is wrong or bad, but that the law cannot transform, heal, or forgive. Jesus does not downplay the gravity of adultery, but he demonstrates that he has come to forgive those who trust in him.

The Light of the World (John 8:12)

In John 8:12, Jesus utters his second "I am" declaration in the Gospel of John: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In the context of the larger Gospel of John, this statement is profound and (pardon the pun) illuminating. From the beginning of John's Gospel, we have read that Jesus is the "light of men" (John 1:4), and that his "light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). Even though the world rejoiced in the lamp of John the Baptist for a time (John 5:35), John himself was not the light, although he came to bear witness concerning the light (John 1:8). Instead, Jesus is the "true light, which gives light to everyone...coming into the world" (John 1:9). Jesus himself communicates the same idea to Nicodemus:

"And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and the people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have even been carried out in God." (John 3:19–21)

Jesus' declaration in John 8:12, then, does not introduce a new category for understanding Jesus, but builds on a theme that John has developed since the opening prologue of the Gospel.

The Only Light

Still, John introduces several important new wrinkles to the general concept that Jesus is light. First, Jesus makes an absolute claim about himself as the *only* light, with an emphatic "I am" (*egō eimi*) and a definite article ("the") before the word light. In other words, Jesus did not say, "I am light," as though he were *some* of the light, but there might be other sources of light as well. No, he says, "I am *the* light," a statement that means "I and I alone, I and no other."¹¹ This is significant, since the Old Testament identifies *God* as the source of light in the world (Gen. 1:3; Ex. 10:23; Ps. 4:6; 27:1; 36:9; 43:3; 44:3; 89:15; 104:2; 119:105; Isa. 45:7; 60:19–20; cf. Rev. 21:23).¹² By claiming to be the light, Jesus claims to be God as the light of the world who has come into the world by his incarnation. Outside of Jesus, "there is not even a spark of true light."¹³

The Universal Light

Second, Jesus is the light of the *world*. John hinted at this in the prologue by saying that the true light “gives light to everyone” (John 1:9a), and that though this true light came into the world (John 1:9b), “the world did not know him” (John 1:10). In the verse after that, however, John seems to qualify the “everyone” and the “world” as referring primarily to the Jews, Jesus’ own people: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11). Now in John 8:12, Jesus makes explicit that his reach goes beyond the “everyone” of his people to the “everyone” of the whole world.¹⁴ It is not only “his own people” who will be blessed by his coming, but “*whoever* follows [him] will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Jesus’ light illuminates the whole world, reaching Jews and Gentiles alike. This idea fulfills the prophecy from Isaiah 49:6: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; *I will make you as a light for the nations*, that my salvation may reach to the *end of the earth*.”

The Wilderness Light

Third, Jesus applies the truth of his light in a striking way: “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Why does Jesus speak of *following* his light? It is here that the immediate context of this discourse—and the rejection of John 7:53–8:11 as inauthentic—becomes extremely important. If the Apostle wrote John 8:12 immediately following after John 7:52 in the original version of the Gospel, then Jesus’ “light of the world” discourse takes place within the context of the Feast of Booths (John 7:2). To start, we should notice the similarity between what Jesus says about his being the light of the world and the invitation he gave to the spiritually thirsty during the Feast of Booths:

7:37: I anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

8:12: I am the light of the world

7:38: Whoever believes in me

8:12: Whoever follows me

7:38: Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water

8:12: Will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.¹⁵

Jesus speaks of the light he provides in very similar language to how he described the living water he provides, and we must read these two statements alongside each other.

The point of commonality between water and light, then, is located in the significance of the Feast of Booths. During this feast, the Jews commemorated God’s provision during Israel’s wilderness wanderings through three main events. First, they dwelt in booths or tabernacles—that is, *tents*—to remind themselves that just as the people of Israel were pilgrims in the wilderness as they awaited the Promised Land, so God’s people were still awaiting the Messianic reign (cf. 2 Sam. 7:4–17; Ps. 2; Isa. 9:6–7; Dan. 7:13–14) and the new heavens and the new earth (Isa. 25:6–8; 65:17–25) that God had promised. Second, they celebrated God’s provision of water in the wilderness with a

daily water-drawing ceremony as they prayed for God to continue to provide them water for their own crops in the land (cf. Zech. 14:16–19). Third, they remembered God's giving of light by a pillar of fire by night with a nightly dancing in the light of four golden candelabras:

At the departure of the first holy day of the festival, they would descend into the women's court, and they would arrange there a great arrangement. And four golden candelabras were there, and four golden basins at their heads, and four ladders to each one, and [upon them were] four of the rising youth of the priesthood, and in their hands were jars of oil holding one hundred and twenty *logim* [a liquid measure], which they would pour into each of the basins. From the worn out pants of the priests and from their [worn out] belts they would tear [pieces], and they would [use them as wicks to] light with them. And there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illuminated by the light of the place of [water] drawing. Pious people and men of [great] deeds would dance before them with lit torches in their hands, and say before them words of song and praise. And the Levites [would play] with lutes, and harps, and cymbals, and trumpets, and countless musical instruments, upon the fifteen steps which descent into the women's court, corresponding with the fifteen songs of ascents in the Psalms, that upon them the Levites would stand with their musical instruments and sing.¹⁶

In this celebration, God's people reminded themselves that just as God had led their forefathers into the Promised Land from the wilderness, so God is still the light (cf. Ps. 27:1) who will guide his people into the Messianic reign of the new heavens and the new earth—especially through his word (Ps. 119:105). So, when Jesus says that whoever *follows* him will not walk in darkness, his primary reference is not the four golden candelabras during the feast, for they were stationary. Instead, Jesus is referring to what those four golden candelabras symbolized: the roaming pillar of fire in the wilderness, which was God's very presence in the midst of his people.¹⁷ From this, we see that the similarity between Jesus' two statements about water and light runs even deeper: by offering living water and the light of life, Jesus is claiming to fulfill all the imagery, symbolism, types, and shadows of the way that God provided for and dwelt with his people in the wilderness.¹⁸ *Jesus* gave living water that poured forth from a cavity in the rock, and *Jesus* guided his people from place to place with the a cloud by day and the light of the pillar of fire by night. Paul also argues that Jesus himself provided water to the Israelites in the wilderness as he traveled along with them: "For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4). Jesus completely fulfills the Feast of Booths, for Jesus was the source of everything that the Feast of Booths celebrated from the days of the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites.

Life and Darkness

Fourth, Jesus explicitly tells us the division that his light causes in the world: "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." All those who follow him as the light of the world will have the light of life, but all those who reject him will continue to walk in darkness. There is no third way of relating to him by honoring him as a good teacher but rejecting him as Lord, for Jesus does not give us that option. If we take his claims seriously, then we must either worship Jesus as God or execute him as a blasphemer. Jesus will not again use this imagery of light

and dark through the rest of this discourse (cf. John 9:4–5), but Jesus continues to talk about the significance of light and darkness as a choice between life and death through the rest of the passage. Just as the Israelites in the wilderness trusted for their very lives upon the God who revealed himself in the pillar of fire, so we also must trust in Jesus to have life. From this point forward, Jesus will expound on this theme in his discourse.

The Light Still Shines

Now, the light of Jesus still shines in the world, although not through his ongoing bodily presence here. Jesus completed his earthly mission through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, so that he is now seated at the right hand of his Father, exalted and glorified as he waits to return to judge the world, to take his people into glory, and to establish his kingdom forever. Until then, the light of Jesus shines in God's *word*—the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Our problem is not that Jesus' light has ceased to shine, but that we are blind to the beauty of his light as it shines in the Scriptures: "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). The only way for us to see the light of Christ and behold his glory is through the work of the "Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18), who gives us eyes to see Jesus: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The hope of Christianity is to see Jesus. The Holy Spirit gives us spiritual eyes to see Jesus today by faith, and we long for the day when we will behold the Light of the World in his unveiled glory."¹⁹

The Lawsuit of the Light (John 8:13–20)

It is difficult to know how much the Pharisees understand of Jesus' claim to be the light of the world when they challenge him: "You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true" (John 8:13). The word "true" (*alēthēs*) can have two different meanings: (1) valid or admissible in the court of law, and (2) true, as opposed to false.²⁰ The Pharisees are making a claim primarily about the first definition, arguing that Jesus is the only one bearing witness about being the light; however, they are also implying that, if Jesus is the only witness for his testimony, then his testimony must certainly be false according to the second definition of the word "true." In regard to the validity of Jesus' own testimony concerning himself (the first definition), we should remember that Jesus raised the same point in John 5:31: "If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true (*alēthēs*)." So, through the rest of John 5 from that point on, Jesus called multiple witnesses to give testimony about him: John the Baptist (John 5:33–35), the works that he was doing (John 5:36), and even the Father (John 5:37–38), who bears witness about Jesus through the Old Testament Scriptures (John 5:39–40) with such clarity that even Moses himself will accuse those who do not believe in Jesus on the last day (John 5:45–46). Jesus, in the state of his humiliation in his office as mediator, does not seek an exemption from the requirement of multiple witnesses for the admissibility of testimony, but willingly embraces that standard.²¹

The Truth of the Light

Jesus, therefore, has already anticipated and dealt with the objection of the Pharisees surrounding

his testimony's validity—the first definition of “true.” He is not alone in his testimony, and his testimony is backed by multiple witnesses, including the Father himself. So, rather than rehearsing his witness list again in response to this challenge from the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus now demonstrates that his testimony is “true” according to the *second* definition: “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going” (John 8:14). Similarly to John 7:25–36, Jesus anchors the truthfulness of his testimony in his knowledge of his origins and his destiny. He is not like the “ordinary rank of men” who live in ignorance of where we have come from and where we are going, for Jesus knows exactly who he is.²² Jesus' knowledge is not based on external revelation, rigorous study, and careful reasoning as a mere human, but on personal, first-hand knowledge as the incarnate Light. Because of this, the Pharisees' objection is irrelevant. Leon Morris puts it well:

The Pharisees' reaction to Jesus' claim to be the light is at base the answer people always make when they do not wish to be convinced: “I do not see it that way. The evidence is not sufficient to establish the claim.” But light establishes its claim and does so, not by arguments, but by shining. Light must always be accepted for itself, and notwithstanding the objections of the blind.²³

The Pharisees can argue all they want that Jesus is wrong, but ultimately they do not know and *cannot* know the truth any more than a blind person could effectively argue about the appearance of a sunset with someone possessing perfect vision.

The Judgment of the Light

Jesus makes a similar argument about the accuracy of his judgment:

“You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.” They said to him therefore, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. (John 8:15–20)

Just as Jesus earlier acknowledged that his testimony is not *valid* on his own, so now Jesus insists that he judges no one (John 8:15). Additionally, just as Jesus insisted that his *testimony* is nevertheless *true*, so now Jesus insists that his *judgment* is also *true* (John 8:16). As in the discussion of the testimony of Jesus, the critical distinction between the judgment of the Pharisees and the judgment of Jesus is in their respective relationships to the Father: the relationship of a Son in the case of the latter, and a non-existent relationship in the case of the former.

Earlier, Jesus said that “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22). This may seem to contradict what Jesus says here (“I judge no one”; John 8:15), but in fact we cannot understand either passage without the other. In John 5:22, Jesus explained that the Father gave all judgment to the Son so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father (John 5:23);

however, Jesus also said, “I do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:31). The Father judges no one apart from the Son, but the Father judges all *through* the Son. Then, the Son does not judge according to the flesh—that is, according to his private opinion (“my own will”), apart from the Father—but only according to what he hears from his Father. In other words, Jesus judges no one as the Pharisees do: according to the flesh of their own wills, apart from the will of the Father. Jesus judges not alone, or privately apart from his Father, but *with* the Father who sent him (John 8:16).

Therefore, his judgment is true, even according to the two-witness standards of the law that they held in such high esteem (“your Law”).²⁴ The Pharisees embellished the Law with “oral tradition that in many cases effectively subverted the law’s original message”²⁵ in order to strike down their enemies and to defend their own power, but the Law in its purity upholds Jesus’ claim to true judgment (John 8:17), for Jesus judges with the Father and bears witness about himself along with the witness of the Father who sent him (John 8:18). No matter how they try to trap, contradict, and condemn Jesus with the Law, the Law always works in Jesus’ favor, for Jesus is the author and rightful interpreter of it—that is, Jesus is the eternal Son who gave the law to the Israelites at Mount Sinai during their wilderness wanderings.

The Indictment of the Light

As we wade through this discussion of the validity and truthfulness of Jesus’ testimony and his judgment, with all the arguments for and the counterarguments against, we should notice the legal nature of this entire dialogue. One of the chief functions of Jesus’ office is to bear witness to the Father, for he is “the faithful witness and true witness” (Rev. 1:4; 3:14).²⁶ The Father sent him to testify (according to the truth of the Father) and to judge (according to the right judgment of the Father) because *the Father sent the Son to indict God’s people for the failure to keep the Law*. God gave his people the Law, and his people disregarded that Law, and God is bringing an indictment through the incarnate Son. In the Old Testament, God frequently brought indictments and lawsuits against his people through the prophets, calling forth heaven and earth as witnesses against his people (e.g., Isa. 1:2–3; Jer. 2:12–13; Mic. 6:1–2; cf. Deut. 32:1; Ps. 50:4).²⁷ In these indictments, God charges that his people no longer know him after having abandoned him through formal idolatry and disregard for the law: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: ‘Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand’” (Is. 1:2–3).

In the same way, Jesus now brings an indictment against God’s people by arguing that they had abandoned their God, even while clinging formally to the law:

When Jesus appeals to the law and its principle of what constitutes valid testimony, that is not sarcastic mockery of Jewish legalism, but rather an appeal to what the law intends: not merely external conformity to binding prescriptions but the maintenance and confirmation of the truth over against the lie, presumption, and the like. Here, too, the law, to which the Jews think they can appeal as their charter and the basis for their argument, is not, as so often (cf. 7:19ff.), on their side but on Jesus’ side. If only they were a different kind of people and understood with whom in his self-witness they were dealing, they would not aim the law against him but understand that precisely in him they are confronted, in an unprecedented

and most unexpected way, with the law's demand for truth and justice; and then not reject him but accept him.²⁸

The Jews' rejection of Jesus is not one sin among many but *the* sin. By rejecting the Son, they reject the Father, for the Father reveals himself through his incarnate Word, the Son. The Son bears witness to the Father and *against* the people who have rejected the Father.

This is why the Jews' next question is so wicked: "Where is your Father?" (John 8:19). They believe that they are exposing Jesus' lack of witnesses by demanding that he produce his Father.²⁹ Instead, they are proving that they do not *know* the Father—the very charge of God's indictment against them! Jesus tells them, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (John 8:19). They insist that Jesus present his disputed witness because they have ignored the witness of John the Baptist, Jesus' signs, and his fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures (John 5:31–47).³⁰ They have ignored all the witnesses, and rather than demonstrating any kind of high-minded, rational thinking by asking that Jesus produce his Father as a witness, they instead demonstrate their ignorance of the Father whom they claim to defend. If they paid attention to any of these witnesses, then they would know Jesus, and, through Jesus, they would also know the Father. So far from invalidating Jesus' key witnesses, the Jews have only given further evidence to prove the accuracy of the God's indictment against them: his own people do not know him. Jesus makes all of these charges out in the open, in the middle of the treasury of the temple (John 8:20). Still, no one arrests him, for his hour has not yet come.

Knowing the Light (John 8:21–29)

Jesus then tells the Jews, "I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come" (John 8:21). If Jesus is bringing an indictment against the Jews, he now adds another approach by also giving them a warning. The one who reveals the Father will depart from their midst, taking with him their only opportunity to avoid dying in their sins, and they still will not believe in him! Jesus does not, of course, mean that no one can come to faith in him after he departs to return to his Father, for indeed when he departs to be with his Father he will go as the guarantor of a new covenant enacted on better promises for all those who believe in him (Heb. 7:22). Additionally, Jesus tells his disciples on the night of his betrayal the same thing about not being able to follow him where he goes: "Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come'" (John 13:33). But in contrast to the warning that the Jews will seek him and yet die in their sins, Jesus then assures his disciples that they will follow him afterward (John 13:36).³¹

"Unless you believe that I am"

Jesus is warning the Jews to repent and believe before it is too late, but they harden their hearts and refuse to listen to him.³² Instead, they speculate about whether Jesus might be speaking of killing himself (John 8:22). Whether by direct indictment or by warning, the Jews are incapable of understanding the words that Jesus speaks to them. So, Jesus puts the matter more plainly before them: "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your

sins” (John 8:23–24). Before, Jesus spoke vaguely about “where I come from and where I am going” (John 8:14), but now he contrasts his unique origins clearly from them: they are from below (the world—and, possibly, from their father the devil; cf. John 8:44), and he is from above (heaven—or, if paternity is in view, from the Father; cf. John 8:38).

Then, Jesus repeats the warning that they might die in their sins and tells them the only way out of that fate is to “believe that I am” (the ESV adds the word “he,” which is not in the Greek text). Although “I am” is the name that God gives to himself (Ex. 3:14), Jesus is not speaking of his divinity here, but to his office as the one sent from the Father in the incarnation to reveal the Father.³³ This becomes apparent in v. 28, when Jesus again insists that “I am,” but then adds language about his office as the Mediator: “then you will know that I am [ESV again adds “he”], and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak just as the Father taught me.” Jesus is pleading with the Jews to believe not in him on his own, but in him as the Son who perfectly reveals his Father.³⁴ If they reject him because they do not believe that he represents the Father, then they will die in their sins.

This is where Jesus applies the point he made in John 8:12: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” There are only two choices for how to relate to him as the light of the world. Either we can follow him and receive the light of life, or we can reject him and continue walking in darkness. All those who continue walking in darkness, however, will experience a severe consequence: we will die in our sins. There is life for believing in Jesus, and death for rejecting Jesus—and we do not have any other option.

Much to Say, Much to Judge

Since the identity of Jesus is the central question of this whole passage, the Jews’ slow-witted question (and Jesus’ response) at this point in the dialogue is comical: “So they said to him, ‘Who are you?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Just what I have been telling you from the beginning’” (John 8:25). Jesus’ words are notoriously difficult to understand, since a woodenly literal translation would look like this: “The beginning, which [is] what also I am speaking to you.” Leon Morris surveys more than ten possibilities and, finding weaknesses in each, eventually gives up, resigning himself to something like what the ESV has: “Perhaps ‘What I told you at the beginning’ is as good a rendering of the Greek as we can get.”³⁵ If this translation is the correct sense of Jesus’ words, then Jesus is probably affirming that his message has been consistent all along.

Jesus continues: “I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him” (John 8:26). Jesus is still speaking of the indictment he is bringing against God’s people. There is much to say about them and much to judge in regard to their unfaithfulness, for the Father has given all judgment to the Son (John 5:22); nevertheless, Jesus does not judge on his own, according to the flesh (John 8:15), but only according to what he hears from his Father (John 8:26; cf. John 5:30). But even after articulating this idea another time, we still read that the Jews “did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father” (John 8:27). If after everything Jesus has said the Jews still don’t understand the charges that Jesus is bringing against them, that what could possibly shake them from their ignorance and apathy?

“Then you will know”

In fact, a time indeed is coming when they will come to know Jesus’ identity: “So Jesus said to

them, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [ESV adds “he”], and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him’ (John 8:28–29). The authentication of Jesus will come when they have “lifted up the Son of Man”—that is, when they lift up Jesus on the cross. Thinking to judge him and punish him for claiming to be the Son sent by the Father, they “inadvertently exalt him to glory, fulfilling the Father’s earthly mission for the Son.”³⁶ At the cross, Jesus will not be judged by the world (that is, according to the flesh) as a blasphemer, insurrectionist, and rebel, but that is not his true nature. Instead, the cross will reveal the truth about Jesus: he is the incarnate Son who humbles himself in obedience to the Father even to death in the most miserable, demeaning, horrifying manner possible. Nowhere is it more clearly seen and demonstrated that the Son is sent from the Father, doing and speaking nothing from his own authority, but only as his Father teaches him, than when Jesus goes to the cross. Even to this day, it is by considering Christ’s work on the cross that we come to *know* the perfect revelation of the Father in Jesus.

The cross, then, verifies all the other actions and teaching of Jesus. At the cross, Jesus’ office as the “only Teacher of the Church” is forever established as the true teaching of the Father.³⁷ We can trust that everything Jesus says is faithful because he faithfully endured even the cross. Because Jesus *always* does the things that are pleasing to his Father, we know that the Father goes with Jesus and does not leave Jesus alone through his entire life. Even when the Father must forsake Jesus at the cross, so that Jesus alone bears the burden of God’s wrath apart from the “consoling sweetness of the Father’s fellowship,” the Father is pleased with his Son’s obedience.³⁸ Jesus accomplishes everything that his Father sends him to say, to do, and to judge.

Therefore, it is at the cross that we most clearly see Jesus as the light of the world, even in the midst of a great darkness that covered the whole earth (Matthew 27:45, Mark 15:33, Luke 23:44–45).³⁹ The cross is where Jesus gives life to those who follow him through his atoning death, *and* the cross is where Jesus most powerfully indicts those who walk in darkness by demonstrating the wrath of God against sin. The cross is where we most clearly see the character of God to love his people and to condemn the works of darkness. Therefore, the cross is where God most clearly manifests *himself* in the person and work of Jesus Christ. When we see Jesus on the cross, *then* we most perfectly know that he is the light of the world, and that whoever follows him will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus mean when he claims to be “the light of the world”? In what sense do we follow his light?
2. If Jesus were to prosecute a indictment against you, what violations of God’s law would he cite? On the other hand, if Jesus is the prosecuting attorney for God as Judge, what does it mean for him also to be your Advocate (1 John 2:1)?
3. We often talk about the importance of Christ’s being fully God, but why is it so important to recognize Christ’s office as (human) Mediator? What is so significant about his absolute ongoing

obedience to the Father in his humanity to cause Jesus to talk about it so much?

4. In what way does the cross validate Jesus' life, ministry, and teaching? What significance does the cross of Jesus have for establishing the truth of the gospel? What exactly do we see when we look at Jesus on the cross?

Notes

1. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 187.
2. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 333.
3. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 188.
4. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 319. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.i.html>>
5. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 188–89.
6. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 187.
7. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 592.
8. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 319. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.i.html>>
9. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 335.
10. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 289–90.
11. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 593.
12. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 338.
13. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 325. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.ii.html>>
14. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 41.
15. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 292.
16. *Mishnah Sukkah* 5.2–4. Accessed May 23, 2017. Available online: <https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sukkah.5.2?lang=bi>.
17. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 593–94.
18. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 128.
19. "It must also be observed, that the power and office of illuminating is not confined to the personal presence of Christ; for though he is far removed from us with respect to his body, yet he daily sheds his light upon us, by the doctrine of the Gospel, and by the secret power of his Spirit. Yet we have not a full definition of this light, unless we learn that we are illuminated by the Gospel and by the Spirit of Christ, that we may know that the fountain of all knowledge and wisdom is hidden in him." (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 325. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.ii.html>>)
20. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 293–94.
21. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 599.
22. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 326. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.ii.html>>
23. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 390.
24. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 43.
25. Köstenberger, *John*, 256.
26. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 600.

27. Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959), 285–95.
28. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 297.
29. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 297.
30. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 607.
31. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 342.
32. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 331. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.iv.html>>
33. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 333. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.iv.html>>
34. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 301.
35. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 398–400.
36. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 745.
37. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 339. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.v.html>>
38. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 49.
39. I am indebted to Pete Smagacz, a deacon at Harvest Community Church, for the contrast between the physical darkness at the crucifixion and Jesus’ shining as the light of life.