

## Chapter 18: The Sonship of Jesus

*John 8:30–59*

In John 8:30–59, Jesus’ dispute with the Jews comes to its strongest expression that we will see until the day of his crucifixion. Jesus has been publicly testifying that he is the Son of the Father since John 5, with varying degrees of outward success. Here again, there are some who seem to believe in him (John 8:30), but by the end of this passage, those believers will not merely depart from him as apostates (cf. John 6:66), but will pick up stones to murder him (John 8:59). The reason for their intense hatred of Jesus is simple: Jesus, the true light, continues shining an indicting, condemning light on them, even to the point of casting doubt on the one thing they most prized in life: their descent from Abraham. Then, weaving together various strands of biblical typology, theology, and prophecy, Jesus offers a new explanation to support the claims he has put forward so far: *You are a slave to whomever you are a son.*

### Two Kinds of Freedom (John 8:30–38)

In the midst of the increasingly frustrating conversation between Jesus and the Jews about Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world (John 8:12), we find a small island of encouragement: “As he [Jesus] was saying these things, many believed in him” (John 8:30). The crowd has directly challenged the validity of his testimony (John 8:13), and they seemed to fail entirely in understanding him (John 8:19, 22, 25, 27), but a few believe. Immediately, though, the narrative calls the genuineness of their faith into question. Jesus speaks directly to the Jews “who had believed him,” saying, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32). Instead of embracing this instruction, though, the Jews reject Jesus’ words, saying, “We are the offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” (John 8:33). From this point on, the whole crowd—those who “believed” in Jesus, and those who never believed in him in any sense—challenge, oppose, and contradict Jesus. Why did the many who “believed” in Jesus turn against him again so quickly?

#### False Faith

This seeming contradiction between the crowd’s faith in John 8:30–32 and their rejection of Jesus in John 8:33 has led commentators to offer many suggestions in an attempt to differentiate in this passage between genuine believers and others who do not believe.<sup>1</sup> Still, it is very difficult to see where in this passage Jesus stops speaking to and about *true* believers in order to begin interacting with his opponents. Because Jesus speaks about truth and freedom to “the Jews who had believed” in him in John 8:31–32, the most natural reading is that those who “had believed” are the very same people who immediately reject his word.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we must conclude that who “believed in him” in John 8:30 do not believe with a true, saving kind of faith, but with “only a sort of preparation for

faith.” They find Jesus impressive, and they are willing to listen to him further, but they do not actually believe unreservedly in the word that he speaks, as the rest of the conversation makes clear. They “believe” in him in the same sense as those who saw Jesus perform signs “believed” in him in John 2:23–25—with a false faith that is ready to abandon Jesus if his teaching becomes too difficult (cf. John 6:60, 66).<sup>4</sup>

### True Faith

In John 8:31–32, then, Jesus is not speaking to encourage the faith of new believers, but to hold up their false faith against the standard of true faith: “If you abide in my word, you are truly disciples.” The word “abide” shows up more than forty times in the Gospel of John, and it means something like “continue” or “remain.”<sup>5</sup> The difference between true faith and false faith has to do with whether a disciple *remains* in Jesus’ word, so that it is not enough to begin our journey well if we do not persevere in faith to the end.<sup>6</sup> It is possible to be Jesus’ disciple for a time with false faith, but sooner or later Jesus’ words become too difficult to bear, prompting a false believer to walk away (John 6:66), which demonstrates that he was never actually a true believer at all (1 John 2:19). The nature of true faith is to abide in Jesus’ word, even when Jesus’ word presses against us in ways that we find uncomfortable. The requirement that we persevere is not an extra rule on top of discipleship, but simply the *nature* of true discipleship: we are not truly Jesus’ disciple unless we abide in his word.<sup>7</sup>

### True Freedom

To his demand that we abide in his word, Jesus adds a promise: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Abiding in Jesus’ word is costly, for true discipleship requires that we take up our cross and die to ourselves as we follow Jesus (Matt. 16:24). Nevertheless, the truth and freedom that we find by abiding in Jesus’ word makes the cost of discipleship worth it. Jesus is not promising us some kind of secret, mystical knowledge, for “truth” in the gospel of John does not refer to a set of facts and ideas, but to a person: the Word who existed from the beginning with God and as God, who created all things, who has come into the world as the “true light” by taking the flesh and blood of human nature upon himself to bring us grace and truth as the only Son of the Father (John 1:1–18).<sup>8</sup> We do not abide in Jesus’ word in the hope that he will give us some kind of truth or freedom outside himself; rather, we abide in Jesus’ word in the hope that we will gain *him*. *He* is the truth, and *he* will set us free.

### False Freedom

It is this idea that “the Jews who had believed him” cannot accept. They enjoyed the idea of drinking of the living water that Jesus provides (John 7:37–38), and they delighted to bask in Jesus’ light (John 8:12), but Jesus wounds their pride by suggesting that only he can offer them freedom: “We are the offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” (John 8:33). By this, they cannot mean to suggest that they have never been enslaved to a foreign nation in a political sense, for “there was scarcely a major political power whom the Jews had *not* served: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Syria and Rome had all held the Jews in political captivity.”<sup>9</sup> What, then, has caused them to become so angry? Andreas Köstenberger helpfully clarifies:

The law laid down that no Jew, however poor, should descend to the level of slave (Lev. 25:39–42). The Mishnah states, “Even the poorest in Israel are looked upon as freemen who have lost their possessions, for they are the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (*m. B. Qam.* 8.6 [cited in Schlatter 1948: 212]). According to the Jewish Talmud, “All Israel are royal children” (*b. Sabb.* 128a; cf. Matt. 8:11–12).<sup>10</sup>

Jesus has contradicted a key component of their self-identity as the free offspring of Abraham. Even in the midst of their ongoing subjugation to the Roman empire, they still despise the idea that they are not truly free.

Jesus, however, has a very different kind of freedom and slavery in mind: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Jesus has come to free those who languish in captivity to sin. The Bible never suggests that we are puppets who are forced to choose one thing or another in life; on the contrary, the Bible affirms that we freely choose the desires of our hearts (e.g., Gen. 3:6; Ex. 8:15; Ps. 37:4). Instead, the Bible teaches that while our *choices* are free, our *hearts* are not: we *freely* choose what our *enslaved* hearts desire. So, we sin against God not as an expression of our freedom from him, but as an expression of our slavery to sin. In fact, our slavery to sin runs so deep that our culture regards freedom as the ability to sin in any capacity we desire, while considering the true freedom that Jesus offers to be oppression. Make no mistake—our slavery to sin is killing us. The world believes that the ability to sin is true life, but in reality, sin leads to death. William Hendriksen unpacks Jesus’ idea vividly:

He is a slave, for he has been overcome and taken captive by his master, sin, and is unable to deliver himself from this bondage. He is as truly (nay, more truly) chained as is the prisoner with the iron band around his leg, the band that is fastened to a chain which is cemented into the wall of a dungeon. He cannot break the chain. On the contrary, every sin he commits draws it tighter, until at last it crushes him completely.<sup>11</sup>

Until the Holy Spirit gives us new birth to believe the gospel (John 3:3–8), we will continue loving false freedom as we serve the cruel master of sin, unable to “willingly obey righteousness.”<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson writes, “True freedom is not the liberty to do anything we please, but the liberty to do what we ought; and it is genuine liberty because doing what we ought now pleases us,” and by this definition, the lowliest slave can experience more true freedom through faith in Jesus than can Caesar himself, apart from Christ.<sup>13</sup>

### The True Son

These two kinds of freedom are at the heart of what Jesus speaks of as he contrasts the difference between a slave and a son: “The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:35–36). A slave has no permanent rights to remain in the house, which makes the slave unlike the son who possesses rights as the heir of the house—and even rights over the disposition of the slave.<sup>14</sup> Primarily, Jesus most likely has in mind the story of Isaac and Ishmael, the two biological sons of Abraham. Since Hagar was a slave of Abraham and Sarah, her son Ishmael had no rights in the household. Once Sarah had her own son, Isaac, she told Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be

heir with my son Isaac” (Gen. 21:10; cf. Gal. 4). In the same way, Jesus is suggesting that the the old administration of God’s covenant, where Israelites enjoyed special privileges purely on the basis of their *biological* sonship from Abraham, is coming to an end, just as Ishmael’s privileges as a biological son of Abraham came to an end when he was cast out.<sup>15</sup> Instead, only the children of promise, the *true, spiritual* sons of Abraham through faith in Christ will remain. Jesus is not citing a direct prophecy about this, but he is instead making his case from biblical *typology* by pointing out to a story from the Old Testament as a pattern for deeper spiritual truths that connect to *his* story. Jesus will develop this connection between sonship and slavery further through the remainder of this dialogue with the Jews.

Secondarily, this is the second of only three references in the Gospel of John to the Father’s “house” (John 2:16; 8:35; 14:2).<sup>16</sup> The first reference was the critical definition of the *temple* as the Father’s house, with Jesus’ crucified and resurrected body serving as the *new* temple. Along these same lines, Jesus might also be saying that the only way to dwell in the Father’s house (the temple) is to abide in *him*. When we take *together* the typology of the story of Abraham’s sons and the prophecy of the new temple as background to clarify the meaning of Jesus’ words, we hear a complementary message: through faith in the word of Jesus, we are *both* transformed by the grace of adoption from slaves to the children of God (cf. John 1:12) *and* we are ingrafted into the body of Jesus, which is the new temple of God (cf. John 2:21).<sup>17</sup> Through union with Christ by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Son makes us free indeed.

### False Sons

Still, aren’t the Jews the offspring of Abraham? Indeed they are, Jesus affirms, but with a qualification: “I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father” (John 8:38). On the one hand, Jesus acknowledges that the Jews are biologically descended from Abraham. But, on the other hand, Ishmael also was biologically descended from Abraham, but because he was not the son of promise (Gen. 17:19; 21:12), he was ultimately cast out of Abraham’s family. Jesus cites the typological pattern of Isaac and Ishmael in order to set up the principle he will describe more clearly in the next section: that although the Jews are biologically the sons of Abraham, they do not follow in Abraham’s spiritual footsteps, and therefore they are false sons who will be cast out, like Ishmael. If they were true sons (like Isaac), they would abide in his word, but because they are false sons, Jesus’ word finds no place in them, even though he speaks of what he has seen with his Father.

Unlike in the story of Ishmael, however, the difference in status between Jesus and these Jews does not come from their descent from different *mothers*, but from different *fathers*—not different *biological* fathers, of course, for all Jews (including Jesus) descend from Abraham. Instead, Jesus is speaking of their different spiritual fathers. The Father of Jesus is God himself, while the Jews demonstrate by their rejection of Jesus’ word that they have a radically different spiritual father whom Jesus does not name until John 8:44. They are the offspring of Abraham in one sense only, and Jesus has come to make them the *true* offspring of Abraham.<sup>18</sup>

## Two Kinds of Fatherhood (John 8:39–47)

The first objection that the Jews raised against Jesus at the beginning of this passage was that, as the offspring of Abraham, they were free (John 8:33). Now that Jesus has raised doubts about whether indeed they are the offspring of Abraham (and, therefore, whether they are indeed free), the Jews must retreat in order to defend the principle on which their earlier objection depended, saying, “Abraham is our father” (John 8:39a). How can Jesus argue otherwise? From their perspective, either someone is descended from Abraham or not. This was such a critical point that Jews kept scrupulous genealogies and other records, even through the Babylonian exile (cf. Ezra 8:1–14; Neh. 7:5–73). What more was there to say beyond “Abraham is our father”?

### The Works of the Sons of Abraham

Jesus does not question the biological descent of the Jews, but their spiritual descent:

Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.” (John 8:39b–41a)

There are, indeed, two kinds of fatherhood, so that while Jesus earlier acknowledged the fact that the Jews are the “offspring” (*sperma*) of Abraham (John 8:37), he now flatly rejects the idea that they are Abraham’s “children” (*tekna*), “implying that the latter category is the important one: Abraham’s children act like their father.”<sup>19</sup> Jesus appeals to a simple and commonly accepted principle of the day: like begets like.<sup>20</sup> Or, as our own proverb puts it, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” Jesus points to the fact that the apple of their works falls very far from the tree of Abraham’s works as evidence that they do not share a spiritual ancestry with Abraham. When Abraham heard the command of God, he was willing even to sacrifice his own son, Isaac (Gen. 22), but when Jesus proclaims the truth that *he* heard from God, the Jews refuse to believe—in fact, so far from believing, they seek to kill him for what he has told them. Their stance toward the truth of God is so radically different from Abraham’s that no reasonable person would consider them to be spiritually related.<sup>21</sup> Then, once again, Jesus hints at their different father without naming him (John 8:41a).

### The Works of the Sons of the Devil

It is possible the Jews have “an inkling whom Jesus had in mind” regarding this other father.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly they respond sharply: “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God” (John 8:41b). Now, there is no apparent reason for the Jews to defend *themselves* from the charge of sexual immorality, for Jesus did not say anything of the sort. In all likelihood, they are speaking of sexual immorality as an *ad hominem* attack on Jesus’ own questionable origins, insinuating something like, “We were not born of fornication, but *you* were! With respect to *our* parentage there is no reasonable doubt, but it is different with *you*!”<sup>23</sup> Because Jesus’ mother Mary was unmarried when she gave birth to Jesus, the obvious conclusion (according to the flesh) was that Mary and Joseph had committed sexual immorality to conceive Jesus. But after Jesus casts another doubt on their claims, the Jews must again retreat to defend a still more basic idea. In this final claim, “We have one Father—even God,” the conversation is no longer about biological descent from

Abraham, but about spiritual descent that the Jews try to trace all the way back to God himself (cf. Gen. 5:1–5; Luke 3:34–38). What irony! The false sons of Abraham are bringing charges against the true Son of God that he was born of sexual immorality, when Jesus is the *only* person who was not brought forth in iniquity and conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5), since he was the only person who was *truly* born of God (Luke 1:35)!<sup>24</sup>

Jesus therefore responds:

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.” (John 8:42–43)

As he has done so many times in the Gospel of John, Jesus once more insists that he has come from God, and not of his own accord, but from the Father who sent him in to the world. Therefore, if they genuinely loved God, they would love the One sent from God (John 8:42). Yet, they do not understand what Jesus says. Their incomprehension is not because Jesus speaks incomprehensibly, but because they cannot bear (lit., “cannot hear”; i.e., *are deaf to*) his word (lit., “this word of mine”; John 8:43).<sup>25</sup> Just as the Jews are blind to Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12), so they are deaf to Jesus’ word which he brings them from the Father in his office as Mediator (John 8:42–43).<sup>26</sup> If the Jews neither do the works that Abraham did nor listen to the word that Jesus brings them from the Father, then the final, condemning conclusion is that neither Abraham *nor* God is their father.

Still, they must have *someone* for a father, and Jesus now names the other father that he has been hinting at throughout this discourse: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Once again, Jesus is using the principle that like begets like. There is a reason that their desires and actions are so unlike those of God’s and those of God’s servants (Abraham and, in a greater sense as a Son, Jesus himself): that reason is that their father is the enemy of God, the devil.

Specifically, Jesus points to murdering and lying as the “desires” and the “character” of the devil. That is, the devil murders and lies because, at heart, he is a murderer and a liar. The devil has been murdering and lying from the beginning, deceiving the woman and tempting the man to eat from the forbidden tree with the lie that “you will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4).<sup>27</sup> Contrary to the devil’s claims, through that first act of rebellion against God, Satan caused death to enter the world through sin, murdering the entire human race (Rom. 5:12).<sup>28</sup> The devil did not stand (lit., “was not standing”)<sup>29</sup> in the truth, because there is no truth in him. The reason the Jews reject Jesus’ truth (John 8:45) is because of the spiritual sonship from the devil, who is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

The Jews cannot, however, convict Jesus of any sin to disprove his claims (John 8:46). Even so, because they are not “of God,” they still do not “[hear] the words of God” (John 8:47). Although it is true that Jesus is sinless, Jesus is not making this point here—at least, not directly, for his primary concern is to defend his doctrine, not his person.<sup>30</sup> Instead, Jesus is arguing that the Jews reject his teaching even though they have no proof that he is lying to them. Their opposition of him has less to do with him or his words and more to do with them, their slavery to sin, and their spiritual

descent from the devil. By implication, if we *do* believe the teaching of Jesus, then our faith in his words functions as a “visible seal of our election,” and as proof that we belong to Christ, and he belongs to us.<sup>31</sup> If we *hear* (that is, if we listen, believe, and obey) the words of God, then our hearing is proof that we are *of* God. This is an alternate way to explain what Jesus said earlier: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31).

## Two Kinds of Filiation (John 8:48–59)

All of this is just too much for the Jews, especially since they still cannot bring a clear charge of sin against Jesus. Left without any other options, the Jews resort to name-calling in their desperate attempt to discredit him: “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (John 8:48). Their name-calling has a specific purpose, for the Jews believed that the Samaritans were “apostates and corrupters of the Law.”<sup>32</sup> By saying that he has a demon, they essentially say the same thing—that he is opposed to God and God’s law. Notice, though, that they do not simply say that he has a demon, but they attack Jesus’ *filiation*—that is, his sonship. They are mirroring Jesus’ charge against them by saying that his *biological* sonship (as a Samaritan) and his *spiritual* sonship (as a demoniac) is questionable. They cannot charge him with a specific crime, so the Jews instead bring against him general, subjective charges of apostasy, sin, and rebellion.

### The Glory of Jesus

Jesus ignores the charge that he is a Samaritan, but responds to whether he has a demon:

Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” (John 8:49–51)

Possibly, Jesus does not reject the charge of being Samaritan because he does not despise the Samaritans in the way that the Jews do.<sup>33</sup> In fact, he has already begun his mission to redeem them along with the Jews (John 4:1–42)! Additionally, Jesus does not necessarily need to address both claims, since they both mean the same thing to his opponents, and by refuting one, he refutes the other.<sup>34</sup> Regardless, Jesus clearly does not feel the need to dwell on these charges, for he knows that they are thoroughly false, so he rejects the charge of having a demon “only in passing.”<sup>35</sup>

Instead, Jesus addresses the dishonor that they do to him. Jesus honors the Father, but they dishonor Jesus—and by extension, they dishonor the Father too (John 8:49), since Jesus is the Son of the Father. When Jesus insists that he does not seek his own glory, he does not do so in an attempt to maintain the high ground (“...not that *I* would be interested in such things as glory...”). On the contrary, Jesus is very interested in glory, but not in the way that his enemies constantly grasp for any glory they can acquire for themselves. In fact, Jesus was willing to *empty* himself by veiling his glory and by enduring even the cross, but he did it for the joy (and glory) set before him in God’s plan for redemption (Phil. 2:6–11; Heb. 12:2). So, Jesus says this to warn the Jews that his Father *does* seek his glory, and that his Father will judge them for the way they dishonor his Son (John 8:50). Jesus then defines their looming judgment as *death*: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” (John 8:51). Because they do not keep his word, they *will* see death.

More than a warning, Jesus also holds out a strongly-worded promise: anyone who keeps his word will *no not* (*ou mē*; double negative) *into eternity* see death.<sup>36</sup> Abiding in Jesus' word is the requirement for true discipleship (John 8:31), and the reward for keeping Jesus' word is that the true disciple will *no, not, for all eternity*, see death (John 8:51). This does not mean that believers will never physically die, but that they will never die spiritually through the eternal condemnation of God for dishonoring the Son (John 8:50). Instead, believers will enter into the glory of the Son, whom the Father will glorify.

### The Day of Jesus

The Jews, who have been searching for some charge to bring against Jesus, pounce on this claim:

The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” 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.’ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” (John 8:52–56)

The Jews' question, “Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died?” is phrased in Greek in such a way as to expect a negative answer, more like, “You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died, are you?” Their question resembles the shocked inquiry of the Samaritan woman, who asked, “You are not greater than our father Jacob, are you?” (John 4:12).<sup>37</sup> Now remember—the original charges against Jesus are that he is a Samaritan and that he has a demon (John 8:48). Although Jesus' statement confirms (in their minds) that Jesus does indeed have a demon, it is ironically the *Samaritan* woman who ends up with better insight than these Jews, for she eventually comes to a knowledge of the truth, whereas these Jews do not. As John Calvin writes, “The reprobate persist in their stupidity, and are not moved by promises any more than by threatenings; so that they can neither be led nor drawn to Christ.”<sup>38</sup>

Jesus responds that he does not glorify himself, for if he did, his glory would be nothing. Instead, he repeats the idea that it is his Father who glorifies him, in spite of the fact that the Jews claim him as their God (John 8:54). Then, Jesus says, “But you have not known him. I know him” (John 8:55). The Greek here uses two different forms of the word “know” that is difficult to bring out into our English translation. R. C. H. Lenski explains:

Three times Jesus here uses οἶδα in declaring that he “knows” God, in marked difference from γινώσκω, which he uses regarding the Jews; a difference lost for us in translation. The former fits intuitive knowledge, the latter knowledge gained by experience; thus the former reflects the very presence of the Son with the Father in heaven, and the latter the experience with God through his Word. When Jesus says, “I know the Father (οἶδα),” he means that he has been with him; when he tells the Jews, “You do not know him (οὐκ ἐγνώκατε) although you call him your God,” he means that they do not realize who God really is although he has



revealed himself to them through his Word.<sup>39</sup>

So strong and clear is Jesus' knowledge of the Father that if he were to deny knowing the Father personally and experientially—that is, *perfectly*—he would be an absolute liar. He knows the Father, and because he keeps the Father's word, the Father glorifies him. The Jews who neither know Jesus nor the Father (John 8:19), nor even the word of the Father that Jesus brings to them (John 8:43, 47), are liars like their father, the devil (John 8:44).

And yet, Jesus now concedes one more time that Abraham is their father: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). Where Jesus confronted them with their sin in *failing* to live up to their father Abraham, Jesus now appeals to them that they will act as true sons of their father Abraham. As for Abraham, Jesus saw that the patriarch lived his whole life in anticipation of seeing Jesus' “kingdom flourish.”<sup>40</sup> Most likely, Jesus speaks of the way in which Abraham laughed with joy when his son Isaac's birth was foretold (Gen. 17:17), since Abraham recognized that Isaac's birth would mark the beginning of God's glorious plan to bless all the nations through his offspring (Gen. 12:1–3).<sup>41</sup> Abraham, however, did not actually receive the fulfillment of the promises, but only saw them and greeted them from afar (Heb. 11:13). That is, “Abraham foresaw Christ's glory just as did Isaiah (John 12:41)” —from a prophetic distance.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, should the Jews not rejoice over Jesus' arrival, since they are now *receiving* something that Abraham could only glimpse in part? The great promises that God made to Abraham are being fulfilled right in front of their eyes, and they can only bicker with Jesus, insisting that he must be demon-possessed? Abraham would not rejoice, but rather *weep*, if he saw the way his sons are treating his *greatest* Son, the one who came to fulfill all God's promises to him.

### “I am”

The Jews scoff at this statement that Abraham both saw and rejoiced at Jesus' day, pointing out that Jesus is not yet fifty years old (John 8:57). This does not mean that Jesus appeared to be fifty years old, but the Jews were giving a “round figure” that was clearly beyond Jesus' age.<sup>43</sup> Beyond that, these Jewish leaders may have pointed to the age of fifty as a way of putting Jesus “in his place. Many in the Greek world considered fifty an ideal age for ruling; many Jewish offices also required a person to be at least fifty years of age, though there were exceptions.”<sup>44</sup> Who is this man who so outrageously claims to know God and to be the only-begotten Son of God, who is not yet even a fully mature man?

Jesus responds with a clear declaration that he is *more* than a man: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). God himself claimed to be the great “I am” (Ex. 3:14), and Jesus claims in no uncertain terms that he *is* God. These unbelievers are judging him according to the flesh, but he is something beyond what he appears to be—he is God incarnate, the Word who was with God in the beginning, who *was* God (John 1:1–2).<sup>45</sup> Before Abraham had ever existed, *Jesus is*. He is Abraham's son, but, more precisely, he is Abraham's *greater* Son. The reason he can speak for the Father and that the Father glorifies him is that he is united with the Father as the eternally begotten Son. Even if the Jews *did* do the works of Abraham (John 8:39), they could not make the claim to be the Son in the way that Jesus does here. He is utterly unique in the cosmos—not merely as the greatest of God's creation, but as the God through whom all things were created (John 1:3). Indeed, Abraham had many illustrious sons (Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Isaiah,

Hezekiah, Josiah, Daniel, etc.), but none could bring God’s promises to fruition because none qualified as the Son of God *and* the Son of Abraham. Jesus alone is the true Son who has come to bring many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10).

Yet, in accordance with the Law against blasphemers (Lev. 24:16), the Jews picked up stones to throw at Jesus. Jesus, of course, did not blaspheme, but he told the truth (John 8:55), so the Jews add to their crimes of unbelief by attempting to murder the incarnate Son.<sup>46</sup> Once again, Jesus escapes their grasp, unable to be arrested until he willingly gives himself to be executed when his hour fully comes (John 8:59). When John adds that Jesus also “went out of the temple,” we may also see an echo here of the way that Yahweh departed from the temple when the Jews previously rejected him (Ezek. 5:11; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18).<sup>47</sup> Whether by formal idolatry or rejecting the Son, the result is the same: “He [“I am”] came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11). Ultimately, they prefer their slavery to sin over the freedom that Abraham’s greater Son—the Son of God himself—offers them. They ignore the biblical pattern, principle, and promise that point forward to Jesus, and in the end, they remain slaves who will be cast out from God’s house forever.

## Discussion Questions

1. How many ways so far in the Gospel of John have we seen true faith contrasted against false faith? What is the key differentiator between true and false faith? What does that mean for the way that you assess your own spiritual condition?
2. What does this world believe about freedom? How does God address the world’s ideas of freedom in his word? What does true freedom look like? How do we get true freedom?
3. What does it mean to be a child of God? How do we make sure that we are indeed the children of God, rather than being deceived children of the devil?
4. What is the day of Jesus? Why is the day of Jesus so important that Abraham rejoiced to see it coming? What remains of Jesus’ day? How might we rejoice with Abraham over seeing Jesus’ day?

## Notes

1. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 50–51.
2. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 52.
3. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 340. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.vi.html>>
4. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 348.
5. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 307.
6. “Here Christ warns them, in the first place, that it is not enough for any one to have begun well, if their progress to the end do not correspond to it; and for this reason he exhorts to perseverance in the faith those who have tasted of his doctrine. When he says that they who are firmly rooted in his word, so as to continue in him, will truly be his disciples, he means that many profess to be disciples who yet are not so in reality, and have no right to be accounted such. He distinguishes his followers from hypocrites by this mark, that they who

falsely boasted of faith give way as soon as they have entered into the course, or at least in the middle of it; but believers persevere constantly to the end. If, therefore, we wish that Christ should reckon us to be his disciples, we must endeavor to persevere.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 341. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.vi.html>>)

7. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 404–05.

8. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 308.

9. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 349.

10. Köstenberger, *John*, 262.

11. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 53.

12. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 341. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.vi.html>>

13. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 350.

14. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 310.

15. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 53–54.

16. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1, 752.

17. “By these words he means that the right of freedom belongs to himself alone, and that all others, being born slaves, cannot be delivered but by his grace. For what he possesses as his own by nature he imparts to us by adoption, when we are ingrafted by faith into his body, and become his members. Thus we ought to remember what I said formerly, that the Gospel is the instrument by which we obtain our freedom. So then our freedom is a benefit conferred by Christ, but we obtain it by faith, in consequence of which also Christ regenerates us by his Spirit.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 345. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.vi.html>>)

18. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 637.

19. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 134.

20. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 637–38.

21. “Christ now distinguishes more plainly between the bastard and degenerate children of Abraham, and the true and lawful children; for he refuses to give the very name to all who do not resemble Abraham. True, it frequently happens that children do not resemble, in their conduct, the parents from whom they are sprung; but here Christ does not argue about carnal descent, but only affirms that they who do not retain by faith the grace of adoption are not reckoned among the children of Abraham before God. For since God promised to the seed of Abraham that he would be their God, saying, ‘I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee,’ (Genesis 17:7,) all unbelievers, by rejecting this promise, excluded themselves from the family of Abraham.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 347. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.vii.html>>)

22. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 641.

23. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 58.

24. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 352.

25. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 647.

26. “He means that all that he has is divine; and therefore it is most inconsistent that the true worshippers of God should fly from his truth and righteousness. “I did not come,” says he, “of myself. You cannot show that anything about me is contrary to God. In short, you will find nothing that is either earthly or human in my doctrine, or in the whole of my ministry.” For he does not speak of his essence, but of his office.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 349. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.vii.html>>)

27. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 315.

28. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 650.

29. Manuscripts are divided as to whether this is the perfect tense of ἵστημι (ἕστηκεν, *hestēken*; “has not continued standing”) or the imperfect tense of στήκω (ἕστηκεν, *estēken*; “was not standing”), the only textual difference being a rough breathing mark (‘h’; looks like a backwards comma above the first vowel) or a smooth breathing mark (looks like a normal comma above the first vowel). If *hestēken*, the former, then this could indicate an action that happened once, with ongoing significance, as though the devil stood for awhile in the truth, but then “has not continued standing” in the truth. If *estēken*, the latter, then this describes an ongoing condition from the past, which seems to accord more with Jesus’ statement: “He was a murderer *from the beginning*, and was not standing in the truth, because there is no truth in him.” The UBS Committee and the Nestle-Aland edition both go with the latter, with Bruce Metzger writing on behalf of the UBS Committee that the latter (imperfect) form “follows more naturally after ἦν [imperfect “was”] than does the perfect tense ἕστηκεν,” although they give their certainty of this textual choice only a ‘C’ grade. (Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 193.) Regardless of which textual choice is correct, Jesus’ meaning is abundantly clear, and, as Lenski reminds us, “The testimony regarding his [the devil’s] fall is recorded elsewhere.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 653.)

30. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 353. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.ix.html>>

31. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 354. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.ix.html>>

32. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 354. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.ix.html>>

33. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 414.

34. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 355. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.ix.html>>

35. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 658.

36. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 137.

37. Köstenberger, *John*, 270–71.

38. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 357. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.x.html>>

39. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 666.

40. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 360. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.xi.html>>

41. “What seems to us to be the most reasonable explanation of this saying is the following: Abraham exultantly rejoiced when God promised to give him a son. He could hardly wait until the promise was fulfilled. And when for the centenarian that happy day actually arrived, the child was called Isaac; i.e., laughter. The promise of the birth of that son (and also the realization of that promise) meant everything to Abraham; for not only were many *temporal* blessings connected with it but also *the one great spiritual blessing*, namely, that all the families of the earth would be blessed through this birth. Did Abraham, even in his day, understand that not Isaac himself would be the Hope of mankind but that Isaac’s birth would pave the way for the coming of the real Messiah? He certainly must have confidently expected that God would accomplish his designs through Isaac, for when God ordered him to sacrifice his son, he was thoroughly convinced that death would not have the last word, but that God, if necessary, would raise Isaac back to life (Gen. 22; cf. Heb. 11:17–19). And why was his heart so filled with joy in connection with Isaac’s birth. Isaac was his own son, the son *of Sarah*. But was there still a deeper reason? Yes, and it was this: he interpreted God’s promise (Gen. 15:4–6; 17:1–8; cf. 22:18) as meaning that in the line of Isaac the Blessed One would at length arrive through whom God would bless all the nations. Thus, as is stated specifically in Heb. 11:13, he (and others before and after him) died in

faith, not having received (the fulfillment of) the promises, but having *greeted them from afar*. It was thus that Abraham saw the day of Christ and rejoiced.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 64–65.)

42. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 768.

43. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 357–58.

44. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 769.

45. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 362. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.xi.html>>

46. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 363. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiv.xi.html>>

47. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 774.