

## Before Abraham Was, I Am

*John 8:48-59*

**Thought for the Day:** Jesus Christ is God. He promises that all who honor Him by hearing, believing, and obeying His word will never experience eternal death.

In John chapter eight, Jesus is conversing with the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem. They have asserted that they are the physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham. Furthermore, that God is their Father. But Jesus has informed them that they are not the children of Abraham, nor of God. Rather, they are the children of the devil. The proof of this fact is that they are seeking to kill Jesus, and they refuse to believe and accept His message.

### **48 The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"**

- Unable to refute Jesus' evidence against them, the Jews resorted to name-calling by accusing Him of being a demon possessed half-breed.
  - Accusing someone of being a Samaritan was the greatest insult that one Jew could hurl at another.
  - The Jews looked down on the Samaritans because of their intermarriage with heathens and their religious impurity.
  - In effect, they were calling Jesus a false teacher and a traitor to Israel.
- The accusation of being demon possessed indicates that they thought that He was insane: "To them, only a man out of his mind would ever make the claims which Jesus had been making." (*MacDonald, p. 2139*)

### **49 Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.**

- Jesus did not respond to the insult of being called a Samaritan, but He did refute the blasphemous claim that He was demon possessed.
- "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return..." (1 Peter 2:22-23)
- In everything that Jesus said and did, He sought to bring honor to His heavenly Father.
- "Ironically, by their dishonor of Jesus, the Jews were dishonoring the very God whom they claimed as their Father. Earlier Jesus had warned them, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (5:23; cf. 15:23; 1 John 2:23). Thus, it is only those who honor the Son whom the Father honors in return (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3)." (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*)

### **50 Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.**

- Jesus came to honor and glorify His heavenly Father at great personal sacrifice to Himself. (Mark 10:45)

He left His Father's throne above, So free, so infinite His grace!  
Emptied Himself of all but love, And bled for Adam's helpless race. (*Charles Wesley*)
- Because Jesus honored and glorified the Father in all that He did, the Father has honored and glorified Him. And He will judge all those who do not join Him in honoring His Son. (Philippians 2:9-11)

Together with the warning of verse 50, Jesus also gave a promise that those who honor Him by obeying His Word, will receive God's gift of eternal life.

**51 Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."**

- "Truly, truly..." – a solemn declaration of truth: Most assuredly I say to you, I guarantee you, I give you my word.
- [This promise] "could only be uttered by One who was God Himself.... Jesus promised that if anyone keeps His Word, that person shall never see death. This cannot refer to physical death because many believers in the Lord Jesus die each day. The reference is to spiritual death. The Lord was saying that those who believe on Him are delivered from eternal death and shall never suffer the pangs of hell." (*MacDonald, p. 2139*)
- This is Jesus' solemn promise that those who believe in Him and His words will receive God's gift of eternal life.
- "To keep Jesus' word means to hear his words and obey them. Keeping Jesus' word includes relying on the character, ability, strength, and truth of what he promised. When Jesus said that those who obeyed wouldn't die, he was talking about spiritual death, not physical death. Even physical death, however, will eventually be overcome. Those who follow Christ will be raised to live eternally with him." (*The Life Application Commentary Series*)

**52 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.'**

- Jesus' claim that He could give eternal life to all who obeyed His word convinced the Jews even more that He was insane—demon possessed!

**53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?"**

- They realized that Jesus was claiming to be greater than Abraham and the prophets—He was claiming to be God!

**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.'**

- Jesus pointed out that, if He was seeking to glorify Himself, it would be worthless.
- Rather, it was God the Father who was glorifying Him—and that was all that mattered!

**55 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.**

- Jesus repeats His accusation that these Jews did not know God while He, in fact, did. He knew God and obeyed His word.

**56 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."**

- "Since the Jews insisted on bringing Abraham into the argument, the Lord reminded them that Abraham had looked forward to the day of the Messiah, and he had actually seen it by faith, and was glad. The Lord Jesus was saying that He was the One to whom Abraham looked forward. Abraham's faith rested in the coming of Christ.... Thus the Lord Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of all the prophecies in the OT concerning the Messiah." (*MacDonald, p. 2140*)

- How were people in the Old Testament saved? Salvation in all ages is by grace, through faith, manifested in obedience. It is a free gift from God to all who believe in His revealed Word (progressive revelation), manifested in obedience to that Word.
  - Abraham was saved by faith. Faith in what? Faith in the promises of God (Romans 4:3, 18-22; Hebrews 11:13). And he acted in obedience to God's word. (Genesis 22)
  - He "saw" and "rejoiced" in the coming of the Messiah.

**57 So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"**

- "Once again the Jews revealed their inability to understand divine [spiritual] truth.... The Lord Jesus claimed for Himself a position greater than Abraham. He was the Object of Abraham's thoughts and hopes. Abraham looked forward by faith to Christ's day. The Jews could not understand this. They reasoned that Jesus was not yet fifty years old. (Actually He was only about thirty-three years of age at this time.) How could He have seen Abraham?" (*MacDonald, p. 2140*)
- Jesus did not correct their twisted thinking at this point. He went with it, and used it to once again proclaim His deity.

**58 Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."**

- "The Lord Jesus here made another clear claim to be God. He did not say, "Before Abraham was, I was." That might simply mean that He came into existence before Abraham. Rather, He used the Name of God: I AM [from Exodus 3:14]. The Lord Jesus had dwelt with God the Father from all eternity. There was never a time when He came into being, or when He did not exist. Therefore He said, "Before Abraham was, I AM." (*MacDonald, p. 2140*)
- Jesus was undeniably proclaiming His full deity!

**59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.**

- "The Jews understood exactly what Jesus meant when He said, 'Before Abraham was, I AM.' He was claiming to be Jehovah! It was for this reason they sought to stone Him, because to them this was blasphemy. They were unwilling to accept the fact that the Messiah was standing in their midst. They would not have Him to reign over them!" (*MacDonald, p. 2140*)
- "No other religious figure in all of history has made such claims. Either Jesus was God or he was a madman. His claim to deity demands a response. It cannot be ignored. The Jewish leaders tried to stone Jesus for blasphemy because he claimed equality with God. But Jesus is God. How have you responded to Jesus, the Son of God?" (*The Life Application Commentary Series*)
- What is your response to Jesus Christ? He is either a liar, a lunatic, or He is the Lord! "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word [hears, believes, and obeys], he will never see death" (vs. 51).
- "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24)

## Did Jesus exist before Abraham?

Jesus made many statements recorded in the Gospels that garnered great controversy in His day. He said that He came from heaven (John 3:13), had the authority to forgive sins (Luke 7:48–50), and is the “Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28). But perhaps His most surprising assertion was given in response to the Jews in John 8. Amid a heated debate over His identity, Jesus told them, “Before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58). This declaration is especially significant given that the phrase *I am* was used as a title for God (Exodus 3:14).

When analyzing Jesus’ comment, it is important to notice what Jesus did not say. He did not say that “before Abraham existed, I existed.” Or, “Before Abraham was, I was.” Rather, He declared that before Abraham was even born, “I am.” Before Abraham *was* (past tense), Jesus *is* (present tense). Jesus was claiming pre-existence.

When Jesus claimed to exist before Abraham, His hearers “picked up stones to stone him” (John 8:59). They knew immediately that Jesus’ statement was tantamount to claiming equality with God, and the penalty for blasphemy under Jewish law was stoning (Leviticus 24:16). Jesus’ opponents were unsuccessful, however. John records that “Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (John 8:59). Later, in John 13:19, Jesus again applies the divine name I AM to Himself: “I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am.” The words echo God’s statements in Exodus 3:14, “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’” and in Isaiah 41:4, “Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he.”

One day, “the LORD appeared to Abraham” (Genesis 18:1). Throughout the conversation, the Lord is alternately called a “man” and “the Lord” (verses 2, 13, 16, 17, 22). This is a case of an Old Testament Christophany (a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ). Genesis 18 provides further support for Jesus’ claim that He existed before Abraham. Jesus visited Abraham and Sarah in their tent and ate a meal with them.

Yes, the Bible certainly teaches that Jesus existed before Abraham. Jesus was “with God in the beginning” (John 1:2; see also John 1:14; Colossians 1:16–17), and that predates Abraham by quite a while. Jesus claimed to be divine on numerous occasions, and one such claim was that He existed prior to Abraham. Not only did Jesus exist prior to Abraham, but Abraham gave Him honor (Genesis 18:2–5).

As Jesus’ resurrection from the dead made clear, Jesus’ divine claims were true! So Jesus’ use of the name “I am” was not blasphemy as the Pharisees had supposed. Such an identification with Yahweh was entirely appropriate given who Jesus is. He is the “Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13). He is “God over all” (Romans 9:5) and “the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14). He was then and will forever be the great “I AM.”