

RUF Bible Study – John
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John 8 – Light, Truth and Death

[I'm not a textual critical scholar, but let me mention why we're going to start with John 8:12 and not 8:1. Most of your Bibles should have a note regarding 8:1-12, and many of them will even put that section in brackets. This text block is not found in the earliest manuscripts. In fact, it's not found in manuscripts until later when it was translated into Latin. The earliest church fathers did not mention it; the Eastern church has never acknowledged it. It does seem that people knew about it, and some would comment on it, so it has some merit, but we don't think it is original in John, nor does it seem to fit here. The text would naturally flow from the end of chapter 7 to 8:12, all still being at the Feast of Tabernacles. We'll leave it out.]

I have co-authored a book, *TwentySomeone*. It's about what you need to know in your twenties. While we explore character qualities, time and dating issues, and other practical concerns, the main point of the book is that you need to take care to know yourself. Instead of getting swept away with college majors, dating, marriage, jobs and other natural concerns, you need to ask and answer the main question of your twenties – Who Am I?

To do this you need to think about your spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality and experiences. You need to ask other people what they think. You should gather a good community around you. You should evaluate what you've been through and how that has shaped you.

Jesus knows who he is. He has asked and answered the Who Am I? question. To put it out there – he thinks he is God. The book of John posits this quite often, and from Jesus' own lips. In fact, all four of the gospels show Jesus' self-disclosure as to who he really is, either explicitly like in this chapter, or implicitly when he forgives sins or does miracles or accepts worship.

So – do you know who you are? Do you know what Jesus says of himself? Do you know who Jesus is? Do you know what Jesus makes of you?

Jesus Says "I Am the Light of the World."

"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'" This is the second of our I Am statements from Jesus, where he particularly says something about himself using this construction. He's already said "I am the bread of life."

The word "again" points us back to something else. Back to chapter seven. Back to the Feast of Tabernacles. We discussed in chapter seven's study about how this feast commemorated Israel's wandering in the wilderness, and how it included a wonderful festival of water. It's with this backdrop Jesus said, I am the Living Water, offering to quench our thirsts.

There was something else going on at the festival. It was also a festival of lights. Every night, the priests would light sixteen huge bowls with oil lanterns, and it would light up the sky. Of this it was written: "He who has not seen the joy of the place of water-drawing has never in his life seen joy."²

The Israelites were thinking back to Exodus again. Have you noticed how many ties there are to the Old Testament? The whole Bible matters when we learn and think about Jesus.

In Exodus, when God's people were released from slavery, they were being led in the wilderness by a cloud by day and fire by night. These were manifestations of God, representations of God. In one of them God was light. But there had been darkness from God for a long time, light had long been gone from the temple.

Let's think for a bit about what light does.³ Jesus says he is the light of the world. What is the light of the world? The sun.

What does this light do for us?

It's our source of life. We must have light in order to live. I realize you can argue with every single one of these if you want to pick out a counter point. Yes, mushrooms like the darkness. So do other fungi. But *we* need light. We gravitate toward the light. Light makes things grow. Light makes photosynthesis happen – we then eat the plants. Or we eat the animals that eat the plants.

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2008, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson, Hughes, Wright, Calvin and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² Mishnah Sukkah 5:1-4, found in Carson, 337

³ Thoughts from Keller's sermon on this text

Light is our source of truth. When we want to know something, we shine the light on it. Figuratively and literally. We put it under the microscopic light. We shine our lights so we can examine it. If you go bumping around in the night, you don't know where you are or where to go. I have experience with this, since I've been known to sleepwalk. There are times when I can't find my way out of my own room because I'm sleeping in the dark. Turning on the light always helps.

And light brings us joy. We love to sit by the fire. It attracts us. It makes us feel warm and cozy. When you have a child screaming in the night, you turn on the light and see what is the matter. Light is beauty and happiness. Light chases away depression and sorrow. We suffer from seasonal dysfunction disorder if we don't get enough light.

But think about this – if you received ALL of the light, you would die. You cannot stare into the sun. If you did, you'd be blinded. Too much light will blind you and kill you. It will rob you of life. If you only have light, you won't be able to see the truth. You'll be overwhelmed by the light and not be able to see anything else. And light can also rob you of joy. You can be self-conscious under the lights and freeze up. You'll feel exposed to the world, to the watching eyes, and you can start to hate the light and love the darkness instead. Too much light hurts.

I had a friend who tanned in a tanning bed at home. Just the right amount made her skin look healthy (if it was healthy was another matter). One day she fell asleep and was in the tanning bed for three hours. She burned to a crisp. Too much light hurt her.

Friends, we need the light of the world. That is a picture for God. God is the light of the world. He gives life. He makes truth. He gives joy. But you can't handle him. He's too much for you. He would be like looking directly into the sun. He's too holy for you; you're too sinful for him. He's too awesome for you; you're too puny to handle it.

Jesus says he is the light of the world, and that means he is the mediator for you. God has always worked through mediators. Jesus is God, but he is the one who gives access to God. If you look at Jesus, you can look at God and not be burned. He will get you in. He will get you through.

It's because of following and believing in Jesus that you can be forgiven of your sins and receive life and joy. He exposes your sins, your hatred, your hard hearts. But he also forgives. He says later on in the discussion: *"I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."* Jesus offers life. Because he is the judge. He is the light of the world. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He comes from God, speaks for God, has authority from God, and you can see him and have access to him. That's how you get to know God.

We've talked about how it would have been very cool if Jesus had gone to the Romans and swooped down into the midst of a gladiator fight to tell everyone who he is. In a different way, in a Jewish way, that's what he's doing here.

It's like he's come to an OU-OSU football game in Norman. Just after the game has ended, Jesus stands up in the endzone and says, "I am THE touchdown. All the touchdowns you have ever had or ever will have are found in me. Whoever follows me will never have to punt and will never have to lose."

Who *is* this guy? The Jews got it. They knew when he said he was the light of the world, it was a strange, huge claim. John writes in 8:20 with some surprise that no one tried to kill him then and there. It was too public of a place to murder Jesus. But it was on their minds.

Do you know the light of the world? Do you have an excuse as to why you shouldn't follow Jesus?

Jesus Says "I Am."

Jesus has a longer conversation with the Jews who were gathered around. John writes that many believed him. But many also want to kill him.

To them he starts discussing just why they hate him so much. He goes back to origins, lineages, genealogies.

Do you know where you came from? Do you know who your descendants are? I have a friend named Bruce Edstrom who is of Swedish descent. His wife told me about how they went back for a worldwide Edstrom family reunion in Sweden a few years back, and how strange and cool it was to see how everyone really did look alike. The town was filled with Edstroms.

Like many others, I have a mixed heritage. Some Dutch maybe. Other European sources, so we're not too sure past a certain point. We can't in any way call our selves "pure-blooded" anything.

But the Jews could. Or at least they wanted to. They were descendants from Abraham, and, for God's people, that was something to be proud of. Although this lineage should have prompted obligation and responsibility, instead it had turned into a sense of pride, privilege and something to be protected. It had gone wrong. It had turned sour.

You know families like this. The grandparents and parents work hard. They're godly, upstanding people, who give back to the community. Everyone knows and likes The Smiths. But the kids... they're impossible. They think everyone should owe them, should wait on them, should do whatever they say. They take the privileges from their families, and turn them into a presumption on others. No one likes this; no one likes them.

Jesus goes after just this type of thinking in a stark way. We're becoming acquainted with a surprising Jesus. He doesn't always do or say what we'd expect. And this is a big one for our new, growing data bank. Jesus tells these listeners, these religious people that they are actually children of the devil. Whoa!

That is not a nice thing to say to people. Jesus says there is really no neutral ground. You are either children of God who follow God, love God, and love the things of God – or you're a child of the devil who hates God, rebels against God and

hates the things of God. If you are not believing in, following and trusting in the God of light found in Jesus, you are in darkness and rebellion. You are doing the will of the devil, who was a murderer in the beginning.

That doesn't mean you always do the worst thing you could do. But it does mean you hate God, even if it's a nice, moral hatred. There are many ways to hate God. Some of them are vocal, active and demonstrative. Others are quiet, passive and not likely to be noticed. But they are both hatred.

Jesus calls that out. He names it for what it is. Those listening to him think he's crazy, just like you might think he's crazy. We're not children of the devil! We're good people. We're moral people! We keep the law! We're Jewish people! We're the children of Abraham!

Jesus says, "*Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day.*" They know what that means. Jesus is saying, Abraham knew that I would be the Messiah. "The day" was the day of the Messiah.

But the Jews don't want that to be true, so they try to make fun of him and make it sound like another way the meaning could go. You weren't a contemporary of Abraham, they said. You're less than 50, and Abraham lived thousands of years ago. C'mon!

This is when Jesus says something huge. He's already claimed to be the light of the world, which we know means he claimed to be God. Now he says this, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.*" What does that mean?

First, Jesus is serious about what he's saying. When he prefaces something with "Truly, truly" that means, "Listen to what I'm about to tell you." Gather round. Pay attention. So we're ready for something big and important.

Let's next notice that it is just a grammatically incorrect sentence. The verb tenses don't match up. We have a past tense verb and a present tense verb functioning together. So Jesus should say Before Abraham is, I am. Or: Before Abraham was, I was. Now, neither one of these make sense. Before Abraham is, I am? What does that even mean?

This is either an ungrammatical sentence or something crazy that doesn't make sense. But the Jews made sense of it. Did you catch the very last sentence in the chapter? *So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out the temple.*

That's a pretty strong reaction to bad grammar or crazy talk. I hope you wouldn't be such a hot-tempered English teacher if your students got their verb tenses wrong. I hear people say crazy things all the time, and I'm not ever thinking I need to pick up stones for throwing.

Why are the Jews so mad? Because they know what Jesus is saying. They get it, even if we don't.

If you go back and read in Isaiah, especially chapters 40-55, you'll start to hear God talking about his attributes using the words "I am." For example, Isaiah 41:14, "*Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.*" Or 43:11, 13, "*I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.... Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can turn it back?*"

God is calling over and over again to his people, explaining who he is using the words "I am..."

But it's more than that. Again, think back to Exodus, all the way back to chapter three. That's where Moses found the burning bush and was commissioned to be the temporary, pre-Jesus redeemer of God's elect, to bring God's people out of slavery and into worship.

When God is speaking to Moses in the burning bush (light), he tells Moses his name, which is a big deal. Up to that point, God's people had only known a general name for God, Elohim. But here God gives a personal name.

Names are important. If I don't know your name, then you don't think I know you, and you're probably right. You can know a lot about a person, but if during that or after that, you only know a screen name or AIM name or not even know his name, then do you really know him?

God says his name is Yahweh, which means I am who I am. It's a staggering, important revelation.

The Jews knew how important knowing God's name was, but they turned that knowledge into a negative thing. They refused to speak his name. They would read the word Adonai, what we translate as Lord, every time they came across the name Yahweh in the Scriptures. They wouldn't say it.

This is like how people don't want to say Voldemort in Harry Potter. They come up with other constructions because they think the name itself carries power.

Jesus says it. Like Harry Potter, he's not afraid to say the name. I Am. But he doesn't only say it. He claims it. Before Abraham was, I am. Why do the Jews take stones in their hands? Because they want to stone him for blasphemy. They know Jesus is saying he is God. Is isn't just saying he is God; he is even taking the very personal, intimate, covenantal name of God as his own name.

He was preexistent. He is outside of time, even though he is inside this body. He is the "uncaused cause." He is the originator of all things. He judges the world. He takes away sin. He gives life. He quenches thirst. Those who follow him will never die. He has known the Father. He comes from the Father. He will go to the Father. He is God!!!

Reactions to Jesus

As we've been trying to do along the way, we again look to various reactions to Jesus both in the text and also in our lives. In 8:25 they ask, "Who are you?" During Jesus' discourse at the end of the chapter, he is asked, "*Who do you make yourself out to be?*" We could translate that as "Who are you?"

It's a good question. We're seeing who Jesus thinks he is. He says he is God. Who do you think he is?

People had and have various reactions. It's important to remember and think about how the people Jesus most clashes with here are the religious people. It's not the pagans who are opposing Jesus. It's the people most likely to know about, understand and believe in him. It's the people who have been trained to read and know the Bible. It's good, moral, religious people. In fact, it is the good, moral, religious people who seem to have the hardest time with Jesus. Jesus forces them to realize that their good, moral religion is a slavery. They aren't free after all. They're in bondage.

These people are said to believe in him. That's a strange, discomfoting thought in 8:31: *So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him...* What exactly were they believing? He later calls them children of the devil, so it doesn't sound at all like a saving faith.

We've mentioned this before, but it is possible to believe things *about* Jesus without believing in Jesus. Believing in is trust, love and knowing. Believing about is informational, theoretical and distant. Believing in Jesus is abiding in him. It's following him no matter what he says, however strange. Believing about Jesus is studying without faith. It's coming up with reasons he doesn't mean what he says. Believing in Jesus means we come to him for forgiveness and life, for illumination and truth. Believing about Jesus means we keep him away from our sins, and we don't want him to speak into our lives for we are the truth in ourselves.

Jesus says we will die in our sins if we don't come to him.

Jesus says he is the light of the world. He calls us to follow him.

Jesus says we are in slavery, and only the truth – his truth – will set us free.

Jesus says he is the judge, and we can receive life and forgiveness if we believe in him.

Jesus says we hunger and thirst for many things that can never, ever satisfy us. But he can.

Jesus says he is the Word made flesh come to dwell among us.

Jesus says he is the I Am. He is God. That we can know God through Jesus.

There is a fickle faith that blows with the wind. That faith follows Jesus when he is convenient or when we want to. It is shallow. It comes and goes. It's the faith of the religious and moral, but it's fake and corrupted.

Jesus says true faith is propositional. It believes in things. It has a content. It fills the head because God is big. But it's also relational because it is found in Jesus, a person. If we have true faith, we want to abide in Jesus. We want to study his word. We want to be around is people. We want to repent and confess our sins. We want to walk in the Spirit. We want to live in the light and not in the darkness. We want to know the truth and be set free.

Pastor Tim Keller ends one of his messages discussing how many of us are on the fence. On the one side is unbelief, and on the other side is true faith. We have many reasons to be on the fence, and some of them are legitimate hurts, arguments, testimonies, etc. However, it's really hard to actually straddle a fence. It hurts too much. So we turn toward one side or the other. We face one side. We face unbelief or we face faith.

What could be going on the fence but facing unbelief look like?⁴ In the Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis does a masterful job in writing about the different faces of unbelief. It's not all mass murderers and rapists and "bad" people. In fact, most of the people who hate God are good people. Here's one who is on a bus trip from hell. He's visiting his friend Dick in heaven.

"Ah Dick, I shall never forget our talks. I expect you've changed your views a bit since then. You became rather narrow-minded towards the end of your life: but no doubt you've broadened out again."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious by now, isn't it, that you weren't quite right. Why, my boy, you were coming to believe in a literal Heaven and Hell!"

"But wasn't I right?"

"Oh, in a spiritual sense, to be sure. I still believe in them in that way. I am still, my dear boy, looking for the Kingdom. But nothing superstitious or mythological..."

"Excuse me. Where do you imagine you've been?"

"Ah, I see. You mean that the gray town with its continual hope of morning (we must all live by hope, must we not?), with its field for indefinite progress, is, in a sense, Heaven, if only we have eyes to see it? That is a beautiful idea."

"I didn't mean that at all. Is it possible you don't know where you've been?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't think we ever do give it a name. What do you call it?"

"We call it Hell."

"There is no need to be profane, my dear boy. I may not be very orthodox, in your sense of the word, but I do feel that these matters ought to be discussed simply, and seriously, and reverently."

"Discuss Hell *reverently*? I meant what I said. You have been in Hell."

"Go on, my dear boy, go on. This is *so* like you. No doubt you'll tell me why, on your view, I was sent there. I'm not angry."

"But don't you know? You went there because you are an apostate."

"Are you serious, Dick?"

"Perfectly!"

⁴ I found this in Hughes, 238.

“This is worse than I expected. Do you really think people are penalized for their honest opinions? Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that those opinions are mistaken.”

It takes the eyes of faith to see Jesus. Children of the devil must be born again in order to be children of God. I remember telling Julie when I first met her that I couldn't date her because she wasn't a Christian. We didn't see the world in the same way. We didn't have the same perspective, the same gods, the same values, the same goals, the same redeemers, the same parentage.

She did become a Christian. Jesus says that those who believe in him become adopted into the family of God. They cross over from death to life. Through Jesus our sins are forgiven. Heaven doesn't seem like a fairy tale, but becomes real to us. Jesus isn't a historical figure—he is the light of the world. He is the Great I Am. He is the way to God, and he provides the way for us. That's what getting off the fence the other way means. We hop down and lay ourselves before Christ to worship him. He is the judge—we aren't. He is the one who forgives our sins. He is the one who gives us life and light.

You see this when he is lifted up—on the cross. Then you will see how God became man and died for his people.

Unless we believe in him, we will die in our sins. But the truth will set us free. There is another chapter near the end of *The Great Divorce* that I would commend you to read. A character named Sarah Smiths shows up. She is radiant in glory, splendid in light. People flock around her, as she gives life to all. She is love because she knows the love of Christ all through and through her. She has found herself in God, and he has made her glorious.