

John 8:12-30

_____ Good morning and welcome! It is good to be back with you all after being involved in our church's first-ever foreign missions effort in the villages and remote-r regions of Southern Belize in Central America. It was, for me, a great privilege to work alongside Dick Stonich, Chuck Simmons, Mark Becker, and my son Steve - as well as 27 other medical and dental personnel - and their assistants to minister to the poorest of the poor in that country. I want to personally and publicly thank you, the church, for your prayers and encouragement for us all while we were away. I also want to thank all of the team members, and especially Dick who took the lead in coordinating our work and communicating with the personnel on the ground in Punta Gorda. His efforts made a big difference in our ability to respond and adapt to a fairly fluid working environment while we were there.

I won't say any more than that this morning about our trip but, for those who are interested, we will be making a presentation soon during the Sunday School hour for those who would like to hear and see in more detail the work we were involved in and, hopefully, consider being a part of similar efforts in the future.

That being said, let's return now to the matter at hand - the study of God's Word - the Bible - and let me invite you to please pray with me now as we ask God the Holy Spirit to come and be our Teacher.....

Father in Heaven, would you now commission your Spirit to come and give insight and understanding to hearts that He has made alive to you even as we give attention now to the very words which were penned and preserved by your will and through His agency. Cause the truth that we find here - your truth - to take up residence in our hearts and minds and, as a result, further shape and change us so that it affects how we think and what we say and how we live and, ultimately, restores and repairs what was damaged and lost by Adam's sin so very many years ago. In short, use this time to make us truly human - as you intended us to be, and as your Son so perfectly showed us, and for which He redeemed us. And we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen....

I think it was something like 6 weeks ago that we completed our previous study of the Book of Hebrews which was, for me at least, a very encouraging book. As a consequence of that, however, this morning we are turning to a different book, but one which we have already made a start in - the Gospel of John - in the hopes of making some further progress in *that* study. I'm not sure if we will finish it in this particular go-around - but I do intend that we will cover some significant ground, at the very least.

Now, those of you who were with us for that first series may remember that we made it as far as chapter 7, all the way up through verse 52, stopping on the doorstep of the well-known account of the woman caught in adultery. If you have a Bible, and have spent any time reading John's Gospel, and assuming it is a modern translation, then you will likely have noticed that this account - 7:53-8:11 - has been bracketed off or set apart in some ways, in your bibles.

The reasons for its being set apart are because among the scholars who have worked so diligently for decades now to study the latest and best manuscripts - which are still being discovered, mind you - but among these scholars there is a growing and over-whelming consensus that this account, as well-loved and well-known as it may be, is not actually part of the original Spirit-inspired text of John's Gospel - what scholars call the *autographa*.

Now, how and why the scholars have come to this conclusion - and are continuing to do so in increasing numbers - is certainly an important thing for us all to consider but I don't think the proper setting for that is on a Sunday morning and so what I have decided to do - for now - is to leave this passage aside for the moment and pick up our study at John 8, vs 12. However, in an attempt to not leave you high and dry on John 7:53-8:11, I have put together a short paper that, I hope, will shed some light on this whole matter and will summarize for you some of the issues that are part of the ongoing discussion of this passage.

To be sure, this does not mean that we will not come back to the bracketed passage at some future point, nor does it rule out the possibility that this may well be a reliable record of Jesus' interactions with an adulterous woman. However, in light of the very high degree of doubt over the pedigree of this passage I think it is prudent for us to move cautiously here. Because there are two ditches that we need to avoid. On the one hand, there is the dangerous ditch of ignoring a legitimate portion of Scripture. On the other hand, there is the equally dangerous ditch of regarding and preaching AS Scripture something which is not. As I said before, the account may well be *reliable*. But there is a difference - a huge difference - between something being *reliable* and something being *inspired by God*. The *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, by Thucydides, is a reliable historical record. But that doesn't mean we are free to use it as a preaching text.

With those comments in mind, I invite you to read the material provided and do some reflecting on your own and, as the opportunity arises, to feel free to discuss the matter further with me, or Andrew or Michael or anyone, for that matter. With that, let's turn now to the passage before us: John, chapter 8, beginning with verse 12.....

(Read 8:12-30)

Now, as we have been away from this book for a while (almost a year), let me take a moment to make some big picture sorts of statements that should help re-orient you to the overall purpose and movement of this Gospel, thus far.

Through this book John has been working to present an accurate and persuasive picture of who Jesus is, in all his humanity and his divinity. His purpose in doing this is simple and straightforward: *so that people might come to know Jesus and embrace him as their Savior and Lord*. Alongside this purpose and the portrait of Jesus that flows out of it, John has also given us a fairly unvarnished look at the differing *responses* that people had to Jesus - some of whom believed in him, others who absolutely hated him, and still others who didn't really know what to think about him.

And so it is that, as the story has unfolded, we have seen the rise and transformation of what was initially only a generalized and occasional rejection of Jesus into to an increasing, sustained, *official* and not-very-well-disguised plan to get rid of him by the religious authorities in that day! And yet we have also seen how this growing hatred and rejection, as awful as it was, still fell within God's divine plan and purpose and, in the end, would be one of the instrumental means by which God would accomplish the highest purposes for His Son through His death.

Continuing in our overview, and focusing the lens in even tighter, it is important to remember that ever since the beginning of chapter 7 we have seen how some of these dynamics of identity and rejection have played themselves out in the context of some of the feasts and festivals of the Jews - specifically, the "Feast of Booths" or "Feast of Tabernacles" celebrations that took place. In particular, we have in view the feast that occurred in Jerusalem during the third and final year of Jesus' ministry here on earth - roughly, the last 6-12 months of Jesus' earthly life.

Now, what was the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles about? Basically this: The Feast of Booths has its roots in the OT - and in passages like Exodus 23, Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16. It took place during harvest time and was, essentially, a time of thanksgiving for the Lord's provision. It lasted for about 7 days and at the end - on the 8th day - there was a special assembly. Extra biblical writers tell us that it was the most popular feast in that day and age which means that it was also *the time when the most people were around*. And as these people came into Jerusalem, there were only so many places to stay and, as a result, they would construct these temporary dwellings or "booths" to live in during the week long celebration. This is not unlike what some people will do, or used to do when they came into town to observe the New Orleans Jazzfest, setting up tents or living in temporary "dwellings" like caravans and RV's.

Now, as John's Gospel makes clear, Jesus' practice - whenever the various events of the Jewish liturgical calendar came along - was to *make strategic use of them*, i.e., to show how all these things that they had been celebrating as a people - and which were grounded in the OT Scriptures - were really, ultimately, all about him. We see this in Chapter 5 of John, on the occasion of the Sabbath. We see it again in Chapter 6 on the occasion of the Passover. And we see it again here.

At the same time, while Jesus made strategic use of the various observances and fixtures found within the Jewish faith and culture, as time went by and as the opposition to him grew, he became selective and even cautious in his manner of associating himself with these things - not out of fear or anything like that but simply with a view to completing everything the Father had given him to do - including and up to the point of his own death - the appointed "hour" that John repeatedly refers to and which no human hand could alter or hurry or hinder in any way.

And so, just prior to the events we are looking at this morning, Jesus makes an appearance during the Feast of Booths, discreetly choosing not to go up during the first day or opening ceremonies but rather to go up about mid-feast and take advantage of the large gatherings of people to continue his teaching ministry.

By the time we get to verse 37 of chapter 7, this has been going on for a few days and we are now at the last day of the feast. Jesus has just finished making use of one aspect of the proceedings - the water rituals - as a launching point from which he talked about how he personally was, in effect, the water - the true water - that quenches the thirsty and which then continues to have its healing and restorative effects as it flows from the hearts and lives of those that believe in him.

Then, in chapter 8, verse 12 and following, he makes use of another element of the proceedings to make a further point and thus add to what will become a growing collection of “I am” statements found in this Gospel. He has already said “I am the bread of life” (6:35) and to that he now adds “I am the light of the world”. And one question that comes to mind is: Where does this imagery of light come from and how did it - like the water imagery - relate to the Feast of Booths?

The first response is to say that *light* is a theme that can be found all through the Scriptures, including and especially at the very beginning, in the creation account. Indeed, it is that very account that was very much in the mind of John as he was writing the opening chapter of *this* Gospel. Do you remember that?.....

John 1:1-13 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life,¹ and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own,¹ and his own people² did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

And so, the first response to the question of why Jesus used this imagery about light is because, simply put, *it was who he was* and what he came in the world to be.

Additionally, and providentially, many scholars have pointed out that light, as much as water, was an important part of the symbolism of the Feast of Booths. Apparently, at the end of the first day a number of lamps or “candelabra” were lit in the midst of a great deal of singing and music and dancing. This would go on regularly throughout the festival, *with the exception of the very last night*. As Leon Morris points out, while “there is some dispute [among scholars] as to the number of nights on which the [lighting ceremonies] took place, [there is no dispute over the fact that] at the close of the feast the [lighting did NOT take place]” And so it was that on the last night of the great festival, *in the absence of the festival lights*, as the people were there, *moving about* in relative darkness, it was at *that* moment that Jesus makes the arresting claim:

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.*

Now this, essentially, is the main and central point of chapter 8, verses 12-30. Everything else that follows is really tangential *to* or illustrative *of* this main point. Indeed more than being tangential, much of what is said is an absolute digression, instigated by the Pharisees who are blind and obtuse and completely miss the point that Jesus is making which is, again:

- 1) I am the light of the world
- 2) Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life

And then, to tease out a little further the implications of this he adds, later on in verse 21,

- 3) I am going away. You will continue to look for me (i.e., “the Messiah”) and will not find him and [therefore] you will die in your sin and [therefore] where I am going, you cannot come.

That is really the essence of what is being said here. Everything else is rabbit trails brought about by the misunderstandings of the Pharisees. To be sure, the things Jesus says in his response to the Pharisees are all true but they are secondary to his main point and really intended to justify what he is saying and, at the same time, call into question what *they* are saying and even their right to say *anything* at all.

Even further, when you think about those opening words of John’s Gospel, you see how the little scenario that plays itself out here in chapter 8 is very much an illustration of the very things summarized there - the true light came into the world, the world did not know him, his own people did not receive him, those that did receive him, however, became children of God. That dynamic, that sequence of events is played out right here in chapter 8. All the obtuseness of the Pharisees and all their wrangling about technicalities is illustration of their being “in the dark” and their on-going, and deepening, rejection of Jesus. Having said that, let me walk you through the general flow of the passage, so you can see how it plays out, and we can quickly deal with some of the details of it:

- 1) Jesus makes a statement about who he is - the light of the world .
- 2) The Pharisees, completely missing the significance of what he has just said, want to haggle with him about whether his statement meets the requirements of what was accepted as a valid testimony in that day - as found in places like Deut. 17 and 19.
- 3) Jesus, to his great credit, responds to them - even though he doesn’t have to (as he points out in verse 14), *and* in spite of the fact that he has already been through all this with them before - in Chapter 5, vs 31-39. You may recall that there he showed the religious leaders that he met and even *exceeded* the legal requirements for valid testimony by having not two but at least four witnesses to verify his ministry: John the Baptist, his miraculous works, the Father in heaven, and the Scriptures themselves.

4) Anyway, in the midst of explaining why his testimony IS valid, Jesus questions the Pharisees right to say anything at all, given the fact that they do not know who he is, they don't know his Father - i.e., his origins, they don't know where he came from, nor do they know where he is going - i.e., his purpose, his agenda. In short, they know virtually nothing about him, and therefore have no right to speak on the matter.

5) And then Jesus points out that they are in no position to make judgments about him for the *further* reason that *they are of this world* - and therefore discern things in *worldly* ways and with *worldly* standards while he, on the other hand, is not of this world and thus is not capable of being judged by them.

Now, at this point Jesus does take the opportunity, and digresses slightly, in order to point out that while they are passing judgment on him, he is not doing so in return - at least not in the way that they understood and practiced "judgment". To be sure, judgment was a component of Jesus' ministry - but it was present not because it was his agenda to come as Judge - not this time around at least - but rather his agenda was to save his people, to preach the truth, and to show the light.

Nevertheless, an unavoidable consequence of showing a light is that you reveal the darkness for what it is - which is a form of judgment. An unavoidable consequence of speaking the truth is that you reveal falsehood for what it is - which is also a form of "judgment". And so, judgment is an element of Jesus' ministry - not because it was his agenda, but because it was an unavoidable by-product of His being the Light and speaking the Truth. Even so, insists Jesus, even if he were to *at this time* take up his judicial robe, his judgments would all be true and just because they would be done with the full agreement and cooperation of the Father in Heaven.

6) Well, the Pharisees cannot leave anything alone and so, at the mention of his Father, they again go off on a tangent - making only a slightly disguised inference about the, at least in their minds, *questionable* nature of Jesus' birth. As you will likely recall, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and not by Joseph which, given the timing of the events, was not surprisingly mis-construed and taken full advantage of by Jesus' enemies. Jesus responds to all this by pointing out, as we've already seen, that they knew neither him or his Father and, therefore, were in no position to even make judgments on these matters.

7) Then - leaving aside the statement about his hour not yet having come - because we've dealt with it before - Jesus talks about his imminent departure along with the consequences of their not receiving and recognizing the significance of his coming and going. What he says here, basically, is that he will come and go without their realizing who he is (The Messiah), and will return to the Father. For their part, they will continue to look for the Messiah, will not find him and thus die in their sins, and go to judgment.

Ironically, the Pharisees, once again missing the point, come to the exact opposite conclusion, since they were sure that THEY were going to be with the Father. And if they were going to be with the Father, and if Jesus was going to a place where they were NOT going, then he must be going to the place of judgment and thus his language of “going away” - in their minds - was taken as a reference to his killing himself and then - in their view at least - receiving a deserved condemnation for doing so.

8) Following this, Jesus refers again to their worldly/fleshly orientation which so hinders their perspective and, ignoring their tangent, turns their attention back to the thing he has just said which had far more serious implications for them - the fact that unless they stopped looking for another Messiah and believed he was the Messiah, they would remain in their sin and thus die in their sins.

9) At this point, the Pharisees finally do what they should have done from the very beginning - i.e., stop making assured pronouncements on things they knew nothing about and, instead, ask some honest questions, most importantly, the question about who Jesus is, since they clearly haven't a clue. In response Jesus tells them several things. He tells them he is what he has been saying from the beginning (the bread of life, the one who satisfies the thirsty, the light of the world, etc). He tells them that he is the one who *has much to say about them and much to judge* - referring not to his current ministry but to his future one of coming in judgment. He tells them that he is the one who has been sent by the Father and who speaks the very words of God, the Father.

10) Well, at the end of all this, we see that the Pharisees have made no progress. They do not understand what, or who, he is talking about, to which Jesus says that they *will* know who he is - when the Son of Man is lifted up - that is crucified. And I take this to refer not only to the crucifixion, but all that went with it - the whole package of Jesus' death and resurrection. They would know who he was at his *death* because a supernatural darkness would descend which they would have to understand as a work of God. They would know who he was at his *resurrection* because the tomb would be empty. Because the body which could not have been stolen from the tomb, and which nevertheless could not be found or produced afterward, was raised from the dead by the only one with the power to do so - the Father in heaven. In short, with these words, Jesus is referring to the vindication of God that would come to him because of the Cross and Resurrection - a vindication that was real and which, nevertheless, would continue to be rejected by his people.

Now, with that admittedly brief summary of the overall passage, I want to use the little time we have left to try and quickly - and very unsatisfyingly - bring home *some* of the significances of this text for you and me. Right? Let's get straight to it.

Firstly, and in no particular order of significance, I want you to see how *there is no necessary connection between religious knowledge and position and knowledge of Jesus*. The Pharisees knew a lot of stuff, but they didn't know Jesus. And this is because knowing Jesus is not a function of superior thought or moral purity or religious effort.

As we saw from the John 1 quotation earlier on - those who become children of God do so - not because of their having a particular lineage, not because of something they do in their flesh, nor because of what any other person's will or work - but purely and simply because of the will and work of God. Which means that there are no pre-requisites for coming to know Jesus. There is no standard to which you must attain, no preparatory course that you have take, no set of rituals that you have to undergo - God can, and will, and *does* perform his saving work all the time - out of the blue, in the blink of an eye, through the sheer operation of His mercy and grace. If you are here this morning, and you are still on the outside, looking in, don't look at the Pharisees and religious leaders in this story and conclude that if they were not good enough to get in then you don't have a chance at coming to know Jesus. It is not about being good enough, or religious enough. As this Gospel has shown, and will continue to show, God works in the hearts of the un-prepared, the un-expecting, and the un-deserving - all the time.

Secondly, I want you to see the *opportunistic nature* of Jesus' ministry. When the Sabbath came along, Jesus made use of that. When the Passover came along, Jesus used that. If he saw a bird, or a flower, or a person sowing seed in a field - Jesus used that. The point is: for Jesus *every* situation, *every* event, *every* thing around him provided a potential opportunity for conveying the truth of God. You and I talk all the time about having a "good opportunity" or waiting for a "good opportunity" to speak about Christ to other people. Let me tell you something, if you are waiting for that, then you will most likely be waiting until the day you die, or, more sadly, until the day *they* die. Because I'm convinced that what most of us *really* mean when we say we are waiting for a "good opportunity" is that we are waiting for people to walk up to us, grab us by the shirt and beg us to tell them about Jesus. Anything less than that, is not a "good opportunity". Now I'm exaggerating, of course, but you know what I'm talking about.

The *real reason* we don't tell people about Jesus is not because we are lacking in opportunity, it is because we are lacking in love. Now some of you probably expected me to say there that we don't tell people the truth about Jesus because we are lacking in *courage*. And that is certainly an element of it. We're all big chickens, aren't we? Admit it. You're scared to death, aren't you? You're mortified at what will, or might, happen if you say anything.

But you see, what is *behind* the lack of courage, and the fear of consequences, and the fear of rejection is, fundamentally, a lack of love. Because if you really love people deeply - you will say hard things to them, you will take risks, you will be willing to embrace the awkwardness that will inevitably come when you speak truth to them. So, at the end of the day, the problem is not our lack of courage. It is our lack of love, and we need to pray for love - as well as courage - that we might live as opportunistically as Jesus did.

The third thing I want you to see is that *it is not our responsibility to prove that Jesus is the light*, or even to fully explain everything about him. Our responsibility is to show people the light that we have seen in Jesus and to be light ourselves - reflected light to be sure - but light nonetheless, like the moon in relation to the Sun.

I cannot give you the complete theory of how flashlights work. I know something about electricity, and how batteries operate, and why bulbs glow. But what I know is pretty elementary stuff. There is a whole lot more that I do NOT know about why flashlights work, than what I DO know. Nevertheless, and in spite of my woeful lack of knowledge, the thing that I DO know about flashlights is *how to turn them on*.

And so, if I were ever to come across a person who did not know what a flashlight was, or had never seen one before, or who had perhaps heard a few things about them but not much - I could spend a lot of time trying to get across the *theory of flashlights*. I could dis-assemble one and show them the batteries and the switch and the bulb, etc. I could do all of that and they *might* understand what I was getting at. Or I could just pull one out, turn it on, shine it around, and then they would - unless they were blind - “get” immediately what flashlights, fundamentally, are all about. That is the thing about light, you see. It is self-attesting. It doesn’t have to be proved. It just has to be shown, and the rest takes care of itself.

That, essentially, is what you and I are to do. Jesus said that he was the light of the world. Our job, then, is to point people to the light, to tell people about the light that is Jesus and in so doing to “turn the switch on” - so to speak. We don’t have to wait until we have PhD’s in theology or years of experience. We don’t have to wait until we have answers to every conceivable question that might come our way. We don’t have to wait until people are breathlessly begging us to tell them how they can be saved. We don’t have to wait until people meet with some personal tragedy and, as a result, are allegedly now more “open” to hearing the Gospel. We just have to tell people what we know about the Jesus that we know. And, unless they are blind, they will “get” what he is about. They will see the light, if they can. They will either be drawn to the light, or they will be repelled by it and look for ways to deny it, or ignore it, or marginalize it, or put it out. But the point is, we don’t have to worry about all of that. Their *response* to the light is not our responsibility. The *shining* and showing OF the light IS.

And what does it mean to do this? How do we tell people about Jesus and so reveal the truth and light of who he is to them? We take them to the cross. Anything less than that will not do. Because, as one writer puts it, “the exaltation of Jesus by means of the cross, is also the exaltation of Jesus ON the cross”. As this writer says,

One of the functions of the cross is to reveal who Jesus is. That is when the Jews, [said Jesus, would] know the truth [about him]. By this John was not saying that all of Jesus’ opponents would be converted in the wake of the cross. But if they do come to know who Jesus is, they will know most surely BECAUSE of the cross.

In other words, if we tell people about Jesus, whenever we tell people about Jesus and show them the light that he is - *we always have to take them to the cross*. Attempts to soft-sell him or to make him more palatable by emphasizing only the fact that he is loving and merciful and wants to bless and encourage his people - all such short-sighted attempts at telling people about Jesus are inadequate. The cross is the thing that most clearly revealed who he was and what he was about. And that is the thing that we most need to tell people about him.

We can tell them all sorts of other things, as well. But if we neglect that one thing - then we have given up the game before it has even begun.

Finally, and as if I haven't given you enough motivation already to show people the light of Jesus, let me give you one more. *Because people are in darkness without him.* The people around you, the people in your life that do not know Jesus - they are walking in darkness. Don't let your eyes deceive you. They might seem to have it all together without Jesus. But they don't'. They are in the dark. Jesus said it. It must be true. He said that it is only those that *follow him* that are not walking in darkness.

That means that your family and friends and neighbors and acquaintances, unless they come to know Jesus, they ARE in the dark right now, and will *continue* to walk in the darkness and do what people walking around in the dark always do - they stumble and fall, they have no idea where they are going, and they cannot move with purpose and direction - unless or until someone tells them about Jesus, unless someone shows them the light.

And that is your job. Don't start looking around the room for someone else to do it.