

Exegesis

Vs. 52-53 – Missing the spiritual emphasis of Jesus' words, the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that thou hast a devil." In their minds, claiming that someone will avoid death by no other means than simply keeping Jesus' saying was proof that this miracle-worker was, in fact, demon-possessed. Death, they surmise, is unavoidable. To say otherwise was pure nonsense. After all, they point out, "Abraham is dead, and the prophets...." Enoch and Elijah withstanding, every O.T. follower of God eventually met their demise. And we are hard-pressed to disagree with them. After all, while only temporarily, even Jesus died. Furthermore, death is the destiny of all living things is well established through the O.T. (cf. Ps. 89:48; Zech. 1:5). But, as is clear from our discussion before, Jesus wasn't talking about the first death that all men and women must face; he was speaking about the second death reserved for unbelievers only.

Interestingly, however, they then misquote Jesus. In recounting Jesus' words, they say, "If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste (γεύομαι, *ghyoo'-oh-my*) of death." But the eagle-eyed reader will notice that Jesus actually said, "he shall never see (θεωρέω, *theh-o-reh'-o*) death" (cf. vs. 51). And while it's clear that John wanted us to notice the difference, it is hard to know why. In fact, most commentators do not view this deviation as significant.¹ There may have been some twisted reason to switch Jesus' terms, but sadly, it is difficult to know how changing "see" to "taste" askew the meaning of Jesus' point. Both words are metaphors that describe the process of death. Jesus even uses the exact phrase in Mat. 16:28 that the Jews do here, and its meaning appears identical to that of this passage (cf. Mr. 9:1; Lu. 9:27). Perhaps the two phrases are simply two ways of saying the same thing. If anything, should there be a distinction, maybe it is that even though the believers may "taste of death" (the first death), they will not "see death" (the second death); whereas, the unbeliever will not only "taste of death" they will also "see death."² Meaning those who reject Christ will experience death in a way that the Christian will not.³

Anyways, back to the passage, we also see that they ask two "are you greater" questions (cf. 4:12).⁴ They, of course, think of them as rhetorical questions of which "no" ought to have been

¹ Köstenberger (2008), p. 270; Carson (1991), p. 355; Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 137.

² While Morris (1995), p. 416, agrees with the majority, he does cite Edwin Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London, 1906), as having the view that the two phrases distinguish between the physical and spiritual death.

³ See Ps. 34:8, where the phrase "taste and see" seems to imply an all-sensory type of experience with God as the centerpiece of that experience. In this life, the nonbeliever only gets a taste of God; it's good but, for whatever reason, they are unsatisfied. On the other hand, the believer gets to taste *and* see that God is indeed good through Jesus Christ; it's a life that is not only good but more than satisfactory.

⁴ Köstenberger (2008), p. 271.

the obvious reply. But if they genuinely understood who it was that they were talking to, when they asked, "Are you greater than our father Abraham, which is dead?" Or, was the Lord greater than a few dead "prophets"? The answer to both questions would've been a resounding "Yes, of course!"⁵ Considering that Jesus was neither a prophet nor Abraham, but the Son of God, certainly Jesus was greater (cf. Matt. 12:41-42). But these were not real questions as they had already decided in their hearts that Jesus was nothing but some puppet of Satan. In fact, the phrase "whom makest thou thyself" is a telltale sign that they've almost reached their breaking point because it was as if they were saying, "Who do you think you are?"⁶ or, more literally, "Whom do you make yourself out to be?"⁷ Essentially, they assumed correctly that Jesus was "making" himself greater than those who came before. And, for them, this meant that Jesus must be glorifying himself. After all, Jesus claimed that his words save a man from death itself! The teachings of the prophets couldn't do that, and Abraham—the paragon of their faith—was not spared the grave. Despite their good works and good teaching, they are still, all of them, dead. And this man claims to give life? Who, exactly, does he think he is?

Vs. 53-56 – Unlike how he completely ignored their Samaritan comment (vs. 48), or how he gave the barest of denials to their accusation that he was demon-possessed (vs. 49), by comparison, when it comes to the question of whether or not he elevates himself, Jesus has quite a lot to say. And, in a way, Jesus agrees with his opponents when he says "my honor" is meaningless if I "honor myself." They thought Jesus was boasting of himself, and, had he been, Jesus concedes, he would be dishonorable. But, as we said before, even though Christ is always exalted it is never by his own hands (vs. 50; 11:4; 12:16, 23, 28; 13:31-32; 16:14; 17:1, 5, 10; cf. Heb. 5:5). Thus, far from glorifying himself, Jesus says that "it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God...." What glory they might perceive in Jesus was given to him by his "Father," who is also the very same God they claim to worship. However, even they understood the sort of glorification that Jesus spoke of, it is unlikely that they would've wanted that kind of praise. After all, the informed reader already knows that the means by which the Father will glorify his Son is through the crucifixion (cf. 12:27-33). And this kind of glorification is completely foreign to the Jew's way of thinking. "God's mode of glorifying Jesus, through self-sacrifice in shameful death, is as distant from self-glorification as heaven is from hell."⁸

⁵ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 137.

⁶ Kruse (2017), p. 246.

⁷ Morris (1995), p. 417; Carson (1991), p. 356.

⁸ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 138.

Jesus goes on to say that they would've understood this if they knew God the way they claim to, but, as it stands, the Lord explains that, unlike himself, they "have not known him." Had they known God, they would've known any messenger that came from God (cf. vs. 19, 42-43, 47). Jesus even engages in a hypothetical scenario where he says that even if he were to say, "I know him not," he would be, at once, "a liar like unto [them]," because if anyone knows the Father, it is the Son. Ingeniously, however, Jesus equated his fictional claim of not knowing God with their insistence that they knew God. In essence, Jesus was saying that one of them was lying. "For him to deny such knowledge of God would make him the liar his opponents become when they claim they do know God."⁹ And Jesus shows them that he does, in fact, know God because he keeps "[God's] saying." What do they have to offer to support their claim that they know God? They have done everything but "keep his saying." Jesus says that indeed their own "father Abraham," of whom they are so fond of calling to their defense, "rejoiced to see [Jesus'] day: and he saw it, and was glad."

What does Jesus mean, however, when he said that Abraham "rejoiced" and "was glad" when he "saw" the Lord's "day"? A variety of explanations have been proposed. According to some ancient Jewish traditions, rabbis taught that Abraham was privy to the secrets of the Messianic age.¹⁰ If such teaching was prevalent during Jesus' day, he could be playing off a widely held belief at this time. Other interpreters think that Jesus is referencing either Genesis 18:1-3, which makes Jesus one of the three mysterious figures who visited Abraham, or Abraham's laugh in Genesis 17:17.¹¹ And, if the latter is intended, that means that when Abraham "laughed," he was rejoicing because of the promise that his son, Isaac, represented (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). Admittedly, this interpretation hinges on whether or not a distinction can be made between Abraham's "laugh" and Sarah's laughter (cf. Gen. 18:12-15). It is clear from the text that Sarah's chuckle gave a voice to her disbelief, as God responds to Sarah by asking, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" But when Abraham laughed, no such admonishment followed. But is the absence of an explicit rebuke proof that Abraham's laughter wasn't also an expression of disbelief? In favor of this view, it is worth pointing out that whereas Sarah scoffed behind a curtain thinking no one was listening, Abraham laughed openly before the Lord while on his knees. But, in all, most commentators simply run through the various interpretations without landing on any particular one.¹² In fact, Morris says as much but then

⁹ Carson (1991), p. 356.

¹⁰ Keener (2012), 1:767.

¹¹ Kruse (2017), p. 247.

¹² Carson (1991), p. 356-357.

speculates that Jesus might not have been referring to any specific day at all but may have been simply referencing "Abraham's general attitude to this day was one of exultation...."¹³

Vs. 57-59 – Interestingly, wherever one comes down on the debate above, the Jews cared more for the fact that Jesus spoke in terms that would imply he knew Abraham personally than anything else. We know this because rather than ask him what he meant by the words “rejoiced” and “was glad,” they immediately respond with, “[You’re] not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?” Or, in other words, “You haven't any gray hairs, and still you say that you've met Abraham?” To this, Jesus responds by saying, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.” The Lord saw Abraham because he is much older than he appears to be. In fact, long before Abraham was even born, Jesus was. “John began his Gospel by speaking of the preexistence of the Word. This statement does not go further than that. It could not. But it brings out the meaning of preexistence in a more striking fashion. Before the great patriarch, who lived centuries before, Jesus' existence went on.”¹⁴ Furthermore, it is essential to note that Jesus said “I am” and not “I was.” If he would've said that “before Abraham was, I was,” this would've been a claim that he's existed throughout the centuries. This would've been impressive, but to say that “before Abraham was, I am” is to speak of oneself as being outside the confines of existence. Strictly speaking, Christ has no age because he has always been. Just as God existed before the creation of the world (cf. Ps 90:2), Jesus existed before Abraham.¹⁵ John then tells us that the Jews immediately picked up “stones to cast at him.” It had been hard for them to follow Jesus at times, but not now. They knew Jesus was claiming to be the same I AM of Exodus 3:14. But since they would not believe that it was God who stood in their midst, they picked up rocks to kill this supposed blasphemer (cf. Lev. 24:14-16, 23; 1 Ki. 21:13-14).¹⁶ Regardless, although he had been standing in their midst, Jesus, somehow, “hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.” As before, so now, Jesus would die by their hand, eventually, but it was not time yet (cf. vs. 20; 7:30; 13:1). Jesus' life has always been and will forever be freely given and never taken (cf. 10:18).

With great sorrow, we see how God tried to reveal himself to his own people but, sadly, was only met with a stony rejection. But, worst of all, we just watched as Jesus left the very place where his very presence was supposed to be found: the Temple (cf. Ezk. 5:11).¹⁷ It seems God is

¹³ Morris (1995), p. 418-419.

¹⁴ Morris (1995), p. 419.

¹⁵ Kruse (2017), p. 249.

¹⁶ Caron (1991), p. 358.

¹⁷ Keener (2012), 1:774.

no longer welcome in his own house (cf. 1:11). On this, Augustine remarks, "As man he flees from the stones, but woe to those from whose hearts of stone God flees!"¹⁸

¹⁸ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 140.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 10

Text: John 8:51-59

And so, tonight, we come to the pivotal moment in all of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Jews have been going back and forth for some time as to who Jesus was, and, finally, he tells them. Jesus was no prophet. He was not Abraham reborn. In fact, Jesus did not even have an age because, as he put it, he was the I AM. Just as God existed before the creation of the world (cf. Ps 90:2), Jesus existed before Abraham. In response, the Jews pick up stones to kill Jesus. But Jesus' life has always been and will forever be something that is freely given and never taken (cf. 10:18), and so, the Lord promptly leaves. Sadly, it seems God is no longer welcome in his own house (cf. 1:11)

Pastor's manuscript can be found [here](#):