

The Heavenly Vision

John 8:48-59

We have been with Jesus at the feast of Tabernacles for a number of weeks as we have studied His teachings in chapters 7 and 8 of John. The circumstances were difficult. Jesus was under assault from enemies who wished to discredit Him and failing that to kill Him. The pressure was so great that Jesus came to the Feast secretly so that when He arrived, no one knew that He was there. He also left anonymously hiding Himself and going out of the temple "through the midst of them" so that He could pass by safely when they were about to stone Him. In between these secret comings and goings Jesus declared Himself to friend and foe alike. If you had been at that feast, you would have been required by what you had seen and heard to declare yourself as with Him or against Him. Since we are in effect, through the Scriptures, present at the feast, the same effect is felt. Having heard Jesus declare Himself, are you ready to do the same?

We have a song in our hymn books that is called "The Heavenly Vision." Growing up I knew it as "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus." The chorus is particularly poignant. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face; and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." Our final passage from the feast invites us to share a heavenly vision of Christ Himself, to see Him as none other and to find in Him all we need and hope for.

There are three words from Jesus that I want you to hear. In the first, Jesus said, "If anyone keeps My word he shall never see death." What did Jesus mean by this? We know that everyone dies whether or not they keep His word so what was Jesus saying? The saying is like the opposite of God's word to Adam and Eve in the garden. There, God said, "Of every tree in the garden you may freely eat but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Where God had warned of death for any who disobeyed His word, Jesus offered life to any who would keep His word. In the case of Adam and Eve's disobedience, their death was first spiritual (they ran

and hid from God) and then eventually it was physical. They ultimately died and were buried as are we all.

In the case of Jesus' disciples who learn to make their home in Jesus' word and who see that word as life giving, as full of hope and promise, and who sincerely seek to keep it and to live by it, the promise, "he shall never see death" is again first, spiritual. The keeping of Jesus' word draws us into the presence of the Lord. We find that we are welcome there. When you are living for that, for doing His will and keeping His directives, other concerns grow less important. Why worry when God feeds the birds of the air who never plant any food and when God clothes the lilies of the field with such intricate beauty when we know that He loves us more than any of these? Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you. To keep His word is to fill your world with life, the quality of which can be described as His life. To those who learn to love this path, death is no threat. It cannot take from you what you have learned to treasure most. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. And, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit for my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better. Nevertheless, to remain in the flesh is more needful for you."

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The second word is, "Your Father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." Again, the word is at first puzzling. The temple leaders had been debating Abraham with Jesus for days. They seemed to feel that any time that Jesus invoked the name of Abraham, He went out of bounds and they thought that this gave them the right to punish Jesus for that. But, Jesus was not discouraged by these reactions and He kept talking about Abraham. Jesus, here, distinguishes between the historical Abraham and his attitude and that of these temple leaders who liked to think of themselves as Abraham's children. These leaders sought to discredit Jesus and if that failed then they were determined to kill Him but Abraham "rejoiced to see My day, and He saw it and was glad." But

the question is, when did Abraham "rejoice to see His day and saw it and was glad?"

The commentators have attempted to answer this question by taking apart the story of Abraham and then speculating as to when Abraham might have "seen His day." The exercise offers a multitude of opportunities. Was it when Abraham was first called and received the promise and the covenant? Was it at the time when that covenant was reaffirmed? Was it when God spared Abraham and Sarah from the Egyptians? Was it at the visit of the three when Isaac's birth was promised? or, at the birth of that son of promise? or, after Abraham had obediently taken his son to the mountaintop to offer him there as a sacrifice only to find that God had already provided for a sacrifice and thus the life of his son was spared. Isaac died and rose figuratively on that day.

In answer to these questions I want to say, "Yes!" Abraham knew that God's promise reached far into the future. He knew that his descendants would be afflicted in servitude to another nation for 400 years and that then they would come out. His seed was to be as the sand on the seashore and as the stars in the heavens for their multitudes and these things take time. But, He had the promise. Not just the fact of a promise but a promise that he envisioned at the behest of God. "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates..." God invited Abraham to envision his own descendants filling the land, a vast and great land. Increasingly, God revealed to Abraham that he was not alone and that God was with him in all things. His life was not his own but was subject to a larger purpose, God's purpose, which intended to bless all the nations through Abraham. On the mountaintop, Abraham received a tutorial in what that was to look like. His own son, tied down, waiting for the knife but now spared by God's provision, dead and then alive. "Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad."

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Finally, the third word, "Most assuredly I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." The use of the language is unusual to us. "Before Abraham was, I AM." We would

have said something like, I was before Abraham. But Jesus knew what He was doing. When Moses saw the burning bush, God called to him and declared Himself to be the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. Moses later asked, "When I come to the children of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they say to me, "What is His name?" "What shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM who I AM." This was the name that Jesus invoked when He said, "Before Abraham was, I AM." "I AM" means always present, always powerful, always knowing. "I AM" is the divine name. It excludes us all from divinity. It declares what is His alone. But think of the relationship, the partnership between God and Abraham. Abraham was the beginning. Jesus was the finish. Everything suggested and offered and set forth as possible in Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus. Abraham knew that such a day would come. He believed in it. He lived his life by it. He never built a house. His was a life of tents. He was a sojourner, a pilgrim directed by a hope that was birthed in promise. When he passed through those tent flaps coming and going, he did so with joy. He knew that everyday brought the promise that much closer.

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