

## I AM the Light of the World

John 8:12-20

April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013

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[PRAY]

“What are we to make of Jesus Christ? This is a question which has, in a sense, a frantically comic side. For the real question is not what are we to make of Christ, but what is He to make of us?”<sup>1</sup>

These are the opening words of an essay by C.S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In this essay he wrestles with the fact that on one hand virtually everyone agrees Jesus’ teaching was of the purest and best ever recorded. It is full of shrewdness and wisdom and yet it isn’t idealistic. And as a result most would agree that its author was both brilliant and incredibly well grounded in reality. On top of His teaching, Jesus did things that people had never seen before. He restored sight to the blind, He strengthened the legs of cripples, He gave bread to thousands of hungry people and even raised the dead. Understandably the people loved Him!

But that is only one side of Jesus. On the other hand there is the appalling nature of Jesus’ theological remarks. They are appalling because we have heard these same words on the lips of those we have always deemed insane. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the One who forgives sins and the Judge of the Universe; claims that left His audience dumbfounded and utterly divided. Jesus’ words have no parallel among the those the world has come to see as great religious leaders. C.S. Lewis mentions:

If you had gone to Buddha and asked him ‘are you the son of Bramah’, he would have said, ‘My son, you are still in the vale of illusion’. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, ‘Are you Allah?’, he would have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, ‘Are you Heaven?’, I think he would have probably replied, ‘Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste’. The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question.<sup>2</sup>

And yet Jesus, the enlightened teacher and miracle worker said these things about Himself. So I ask you today what are we to make of Jesus Christ?

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If you’ve been with us over the last several weeks you know that we have been in the book of John, examining Jesus’ claims. And I should mention that if you missed some of those sermons or would like to hear them again you can access the audio or the manuscripts on our new website.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C.S. “What are we to Mack of Jesus Christ” (<http://www.cc-vw.org/articles/jesuschrist.pdf>) accessed April 10, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Now I also have to tell you that I heard the meat of this sermon preached by Professor Darrell Johnson when I was a student at Regent College. I was impressed by the content when I heard it and so, since it fit so well with the series we are in the middle of I have adapted much of my sermon from his.<sup>3</sup> If you are interested in hearing his version come and talk to me.

Now John chapter 8 verse 12 is a powerful verse – please open your Bibles to there if you haven't already. As far as chronology goes it is the second of Jesus' scandalous I AM statements. But today even this powerful statement is dwarfed by its greater context. And it is in the context of this verse that we are going to spend our time today.

The context begins at the beginning of chapter 7 with John carefully pointing out that everything in the next two chapters happened during what was called the Feast of Tabernacles.

Now there were three feasts that male adults within 15 miles of Jerusalem were obligated to attend. Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles also called The Feast of Booths.

And these festivals were not somber events; they were filled with days of feasting, laughing and dancing as the people remembered God's incredible goodness to them. And the most joyous of these feasts was Tabernacles.

So what is the Feast of Tabernacles? The feast of Tabernacles occurs in the fall, usually in the middle of October. It runs for seven days though also has an additional day or two of feasting attached to it – so it is a major event. It coincides with the yearly harvest and is known as “the week of rejoicing”.

And there are four basic practices associated with this festival.<sup>4</sup>

- 1.) First, the people are to make a booth for their families to live in for the week of the Feast. These booths are simple tent like structures made out of palm branches that mirror those the Israelites would have lived in during their forty years in the desert. This is a practice Jews continue to this day.
- 2.) Second, they are to make themselves happy. In fact this one of the specific commands of the festival. In Leviticus we read:

On the first day you are to take choice fruit from the trees, and palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars, and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. (Leviticus 23:40)

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<sup>3</sup> Structure and major ideas for this sermon were adapted from Rev. Darrell Johnson's sermon "Who is Jesus?" Preached at First Baptist Church Vancouver.

<http://fbc2010sermons.posterous.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from [http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall\\_Holidays/Sukkot/sukkot.html](http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall_Holidays/Sukkot/sukkot.html) Accessed April 11th, 2013.

God actually commands the people to rejoice! One thing we Christians could learn from the Jews is that following God gives us reason to celebrate!

- 3.) Third, they must give generously to charity.
- 4.) And fourth, they participate in two major ceremonies – a water ceremony and a light ceremony. These ceremonies are elaborate and meaningful productions that include, among other things, the reading of specific sections of Scripture that reaffirm for them who God is and what He has done.

Now we are going to look more closely at these two ceremonies and the scriptures the Jews read during them.

First, the **Water Ceremony** takes place on the last day of the feast. During this ceremony the people remember that when they were wandering in the desert after they had come out of Egypt they ran out of water. On the brink of death they complained to God and He directed Moses to strike a rock with his staff so that streams of water would flow out of it. Moses did as he was told, and as God promised water poured out of the rock and sustained the people. You remember the story.

And so the tradition was started that God was like life-giving water for His people. This was an analogy that comforted the people, but it was also one God used when they rebelled against Him. In Jeremiah God said:

My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. (Jeremiah 2:13)

And so during the Water Ceremony the people of Israel reaffirmed their decision to leave behind their broken cisterns where they sought life outside of God and return to their true source of living water.

Now this is particularly interesting, because it was during this part of the festival that John tells us:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. **Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.**' (John 7:37)

Jesus claims to be the source of living water that the people of Israel are waiting for! When connected with the Feast of Tabernacles you can see where the significance of Jesus' words lie. And so John tells us:

On hearing His words, some of the people said, 'Surely this man is the Prophet.' (John 7:40)

And the Prophet they are referring to was the Messiah they were waiting for who would lead them back to the source of living water just like Moses had done in the beginning.

So that is the water ceremony.

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Of equal importance was the **Light Ceremony** that happened at sun down every night of the festival. During this ceremony the priests would light special torches and dance before the people late into the night. This incredible party reminded the Jews of how God went before them as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day so that even while walking through the desert they never got lost.

And it is during the last light ceremony of the week that we come across Jesus' words in chapter 8:12 which is our central verse today. So look there with me now.

[Read John 8:12]

When connected with the Feast of Tabernacles context you can see the real weight of Jesus' words. He isn't just claiming to be a light to guide people, He is claiming to be the very presence of God that leads people just like the pillar of fire in Exodus.

Jesus' words are potent and completely offensive. Israel was not a nation tolerant of multiple deities. They hated the Roman religion that dominated their lands, but beyond this the thought that a man could claim to be equal with YHWH was utter blasphemy – a crime punishable by death! And so Jesus' words at the ceremony of light put them completely on edge.

But it isn't until we begin to look at the Scriptures that they used to affirm their beliefs about who God is and what He has done that we really get to the heart of this passage.

As we already mentioned the Feast of Tabernacles was a time when the people of Israel live in booths to remember their years in the desert, but they weren't the only ones living in booths. In fact, God Himself lived in a booth among them.

And God's booth was called the Tabernacle which is the Hebrew word for "tent". In Exodus 29 God says:

So I will consecrate the Tent of Meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests. Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God. (Exodus 29:44-46)

And this is the central point of the whole feast. The reason the people of Israel are celebrating is because God had promised to live and manifest His glory among them!

And so as part of the celebration and in connection with this idea the Israelites had a liturgy of Old Testament texts that they read on the occasion. Now a liturgy is both the content and the structure of a religious meeting and every religious group uses them.

Those of you who have been to a Catholic church know that their liturgy involves set prayers that the people pray and words of response that are said at particular times. In Baptist circles we use what is called a low liturgy, and that means the specific words are not dictated by written rules but we generally do the same things every week. So for example we most often have a call to worship followed by three songs and then children's time and offering followed by a couple more songs. This is a liturgy.

And the Jews had a very specific liturgy that they followed for this feast and some very specific texts that they read that drew their hearts towards a radical affirmation about who God is and what He has done.

So what I want to do now is look back at a few of the texts that they read in order to understand the significance of this theological affirmation.

One of the first texts read at any Jewish festival is Deuteronomy 6:4 known as the "*Shema*". This is the first section of scripture a Jewish child memorizes and is the most important affirmation among the Jews. I'm going to give you a couple Hebrew lessons today and this will be the first one, just to get you thinking in this direction.

Hebrew reads from right to left and so the first word is on the right

*Shema yisrael Adonai eloheynu Adonai echad*  
Hear O Israel the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

And the reason this is the most important Scripture for the Jews is that they are radical monotheists: that means they militantly believe there is only one God. And if any Jew claimed otherwise they were stoned to death.

But they don't just believe God is one, they believe He is personal. And so to affirm that they read Psalm 115:9-13

All you Israelites, trust in the LORD—  
**He** is their help and shield.  
House of Aaron, trust in the LORD—  
**He** is their help and shield.

You who fear Him, trust in the LORD—  
**He** is their help and shield.  
 The LORD remembers us and will bless us:  
**He** will bless His people Israel,  
**He** will bless the house of Aaron,  
**He** will bless those who fear the LORD—  
 small and great alike. (Psalm 115:9-13)

Did you hear the pronoun “He”? Six times it is repeated in these few verses. God is personal. Next they read sections of Psalms 46, 50 and 81. And God responds

“Be still, and know that **I** am God;  
**I** will be exalted among the nations,  
**I** will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10)

“Listen, my people, and **I** will speak;  
**I** will testify against you, Israel:  
**I** am God, your God. (Psalm 50:7)

In your distress you called and **I** rescued you,  
**I** answered you out of a thundercloud;  
**I** tested you at the waters of Meribah. (Psalm 81:7)

Did you hear the personal pronoun “I” in those texts. God is a personal God and He is invested and interested in His people. Now the next section of texts that they look at come out of the Prophet Isaiah. Listen as they put together these two pronouns.

I, the LORD—with the first of them  
 and with the last—**I** am **He**.” (Isaiah 41:4)

“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD,  
 “and my servant whom I have chosen,  
 so that you may know and believe me  
 and understand that **I** am **He**. (Isaiah 43:10)

Even to your old age and gray hairs  
**I** am **He**, **I** am **He** who will sustain you. (Isaiah 46:4)

In these passages the people of Israel affirm that their God was both the God of the Universe and the One who had personally saved them.

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It’s time for our second Hebrew lesson today. In Hebrew the pronoun “I” is Ani and the pronoun “He” is Hu. And to say I am He you say “Ani Hu”

Say that with me “Ani Hu”

When put together like this these two pronouns were used to refer specifically to the personal God YHWH.

And during the Feast of Tabernacles the priests would sing the song of Moses in Deuteronomy which crescendos with the line:

'See now that **I, I** am **He**,  
And there is no god besides Me (Deuteronomy 32:39)

And the priests would chant *Ani, Ani Hu; Ani, Ani Hu* for more than 20 minutes. And as they chant they were filled with expectation that God Himself, their personal God and Saviour, would show up like He used to when He dwelled among His people in the Tabernacle. That is what the Feast of Tabernacles is all about.

Now here is where this really heats up. When the Greek translators translated these Hebrew words they use vocabulary that if you have been with us over the last several weeks you will be very familiar with.

*Ego* is the Greek translation for I and *Emi* is translated I am or I am he. And in order to stress the theological point that the Hebrew text was trying to make they put them together *Ego Emi*. I, I am He.

Now picture hundreds of priests gathered and chanting these words. *Ani, Ani Hu, Ego, Ego Emi*, I, I am He. Over and over again in anticipation that God would show up.

That should send shivers down your spine!

Now we are ready to see the significance of John 7 and 8. After Jesus says the words we read in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." The people question Him directly. In verse 25 they say "Who are you?" And in verse 53 they say "who do you make yourself out to be?" And this is our question today, "what are we to make of Jesus Christ?"

And Jesus answers those questions in three succinct sentences that given the context of the Feast of Tabernacles would have been both crystal clear to His audience as well as utterly offensive. And I will use the NASB translation here because it captures the significance of Jesus' words better than the NIV does in this case.

First Jesus says:

You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that **I am He**, you will die in your sins. (John 8:23 NASB)

Then He says:

When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that **I am He**. (John 8:28 NASB)

And finally He says:

Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, **I Am** [*Ego Emi*] (John 8:58)

Is it any wonder that the very next verse tells us that the people picked up stones to throw at Him. There was no doubt what Jesus was saying in their minds. A misunderstanding would have been impossible with the priests chanting *Ani, Ani Hu* in the background.

Now in case you are wondering you can't get stoned for just any crime in ancient Israel, this kind of death was reserved for the vilest offenders – for blasphemers – people who took God's great Name in vain.

In John 10 where the Jews once again picked up stones to stone Jesus he asked them

**"I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?"**

The Jews answered Him, "for a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God." (John 10:32-33)

Jesus' original audience understood what He was saying. And this wasn't a slip of the tongue for Jesus. Aside from the other I AM statements that we have been looking at in this series there are several other places where Jesus says **I am He** to the amazement of the people.

In John 4 when Jesus is talking to the woman at the well – the one who had five husbands and was living with a sixth man now – we read:

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared, **"I who speak to you am He."** (John 4:25-26)

You do well to wait for the Messiah, but wait no longer, the Messiah is here, and in fact the Messiah you seek is the very God you worship! I am He.

In chapter 6 where John is careful to point out that we are in the season of Passover which was when the Jews remembered that God brought them out of Egypt by splitting the Red Sea, we come across the story of the disciples

crossing the storm tossed Sea of Galilee when Jesus came walking to them on the water. They cried out in terror, but Jesus responded “*Ego Emi*” I am He, do not be afraid.”

And then in chapter 18 when Judas comes with the band of thugs to arrest Jesus, Jesus asks them

“Whom do you seek?”

They answered Him, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He said to them, “I am He.”... So when He said to them, “I am He,” they drew back and fell to the ground. (John 18:4-6)

Here was a group of Jews so used to hitting the floor in worship at these words that even when they have come to arrest Jesus with weapons they find themselves on their faces at His claim.

No, there is no doubt that the Jews Jesus lived among and spoke with heard exactly what Jesus was saying and knew He was claiming to be God.

So then the only question remains “What are we to make of Jesus Christ?” With words like these on His lips He can not be just a great teacher or a source of moral wisdom. He is either an absolute lunatic not worth listening to at all, or He is “I am He” and He is “The Light of the World” just like He says He is.

But as Lewis said in the beginning of his essay. The question “What are we to make of Jesus Christ?” is really the wrong question because the real question is “What is He going to make of us?”

And this leaves us with a couple implications today.

1.) First, If Jesus is who the Jews heard Him say He was then God Himself walked this earth, lived a perfect life and went to the cross for you. He did this so that you could benefit. Or as the song says “so that I could gain an interest in my Savior’s blood.” Friends this should lead our hearts to leap in worship.

2.) And second, this claim demands a response. Jesus’ words “I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness” are words that call us to follow... Will you?

To follow Jesus does not mean simply to believe something in your heart or to pray a magic prayer, it means to let Him transform your life so that you walk where He walks. This is a decision we must make again and again. It is the decision to bring His presence into the world we live in. And this is something Jesus is calling each of us to today. Friends, will you follow the Light of the world and let Jesus make something of you today?