

John wrote his gospel so that people might believe that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [they] may have life in his name." (John 20:31 NIV) So we can expect to find evidence as to the person of Jesus throughout the Gospel. During the visit of Jesus to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (John 8-9), Jesus made numerous claims concerning Himself, two of which are in the present text.

I. Jesus claimed: "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

A. The significance of His claim

1. The "word" of Jesus was variously expressed and explained during the conversations at the Feast of Tabernacles: what He heard from the Father (8:26), was taught by the Father (8:28), had seen with the Father (8:38), the truth (8:40, 45). It is thus the message of God.
2. Jesus called on people to "keep" His word, i.e., to guard, preserve and obey it. It is related to "abiding" in his word (8:31), having room for his word (8:37), and being able to hear what Jesus says (8:43). Jesus Himself kept the Father's word, i.e., was completely submissive and obedient.
3. Jesus promised that anyone who keeps his word will never see death, i.e., would not die in their sin (8:21, 24). Such are "of God" (8:47) rather than "of the world" (8:23).

B. The reaction to His claim

1. The Jews accused Jesus of being demon-possessed (8:52), which ascribed a satanic source to his thinking.
2. By their statement the Jews showed how they initially understood – or misunderstood – the claim of Jesus that he was referring only to physical life. They failed to see or refused to see the more significant spiritual life and death.
3. The Jews therefore accused Jesus of exalting himself (8:53), i.e., making himself to be someone.

C. The response of Jesus (particularly related to 3 misunderstandings)

1. Jesus responded (v 54) to the challenge (v 53) that He was exalting himself. Self-exaltation would have meant nothing. The Father had glorified Jesus through the signs given (cf. 11:4), and through a voice from heaven. God would also ultimately glorify the Son when Jesus had completed His work of redemption, raising Him from the dead and seating Him in glory.
2. Jesus responded (v 55) to their foundational thought, that they had God as their Father (v 41). It was an empty claim in contrast to Jesus who truly knew God, completely and intimately, as His Father, and demonstrated it by His obedience. Hence, Jesus could speak accurately for God.
3. Jesus responded (v 56) in light of the claim of the Jews that they had Abraham as their Father (cf. vss 33, 39, 53). Although physical descendants of Abraham (cf. vss 37, 56) they were not Abraham's children spiritually because they did not act like Abraham (v 56). If the Jews were truly Abraham's children, they too would have rejoiced at seeing Jesus' day as had Abraham.

Some Rabbis taught that God had revealed to Abraham facts about the Messianic age. However, it is sufficient to consider the Biblical record that Abraham laughed (Gen 17:17, "rejoiced" in the Aramaic Targum) at the announcement of the birth of Isaac, whose birth was a confirmation of the promise of God to bless all peoples of the earth through his offspring, i.e., through Jesus. According to Hebrews 11:13 Abraham with all those heroes of faith "saw" the promises of God by faith, though they had not received the things promised, and "greeted them from afar".

II. Jesus claimed: "before Abraham was born, I am!"

A. The immediate occasion

Jesus responded to the Jews' reaction about Abraham seeing his day. They missed or dismissed any Messianic overtones which Jesus had intended and focused on what they thought was a chronological impossibility, that Jesus could have seen Abraham.

B. The significance of Jesus's claim is pointed to by two specific factors

1. There is a contrast in verbs: concerning Abraham uses a past tense, literally, "before he was", or "before he came into being", and concerning Himself He uses a present tense: "I am." It is not merely a statement that Jesus existed when Abraham was born, but a statement of existence. Abraham came into being, Jesus always existed. (Cf. John 1:1, 14 – The Word was in the beginning but became flesh.)
2. There is the use of this phrase, "I am", in the Old Testament. Particularly the Greek translation of Isaiah uses "I am" (where our English translations have "I am he") in verses such as Isaiah 41:4, 43:10, and 46:4, which are exclusive claims of God alone. Jesus was taking for himself an expression used of God in the Old Testament, which the Jews understood and who took up stones to stone him.

Because Jesus is the "I am", He can call people to keep His words, just as God demands of people that they keep His words. Jesus is God.

Since anyone who keeps Jesus' word will not see death, it is important to take people to Jesus to hear his words. We can neither substitute another message nor neglect important truths. It is wise to lead people to encounter the words of Jesus directly in the Bible.

Keeping the word of Jesus then becomes a mark of those who have passed from death to life. We do not by such obedience earn salvation, but we give evidence that we are truly His disciples (8:31).

Having come to understand the person of Jesus, that He is the "I am" who became man, we praise Him. This is particularly true when we understand that He did so in order to die as a perfect, sinless substitute for sinners who themselves deserved death. How marvelous is our God!