

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
8:21-30

21. Then Jesus said to them again, I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins. Where I go ye cannot come. 22. Then the Jews said, Will he kill himself? because he says, Where I go ye cannot come. 23. And he said to them, Ye are from beneath; I am from above. Ye are of this world; I am not of this world. 24. Therefore I said to you that ye shall die in your sins; for if ye do not believe that I am *he*, ye shall die in your sins. 25. Then they said to him, Who are you? And Jesus said to them, Even *the same* that I said to you from the beginning. 26. I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but he who sent me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I have heard of him. 27. They did not understand that he spoke to them of the Father. 28. Then Jesus said to them, When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am *he*, and *that* I do nothing of myself; but as my Father has taught me, I speak these things. 29. And he who sent me is with me. The Father has not left me alone, for I always do those things that please him. 30. As he spoke these words, many believed on him.

21.--[*Then Jesus said to them again.*] There seems a break or pause between this verse and the preceding one. It is as if our Lord resumed His discourse with a new leading thought or keynote. The other idea, viz., that "again" refers to chap. vii.34 and means that our Lord impressed on his hearers a *second time* that He would soon leave them, does not seem probable. It seems not unlikely that in the first instance our Lord spoke to the officers of the priests and Pharisees of "going", and that here He speaks to their masters, or at least to a different set of hearers.

[*I go my way.*] This must mean, "I am soon about to leave this world. My mission is drawing to a close. The time of my decease and sacrifice approaches, and I must depart and go back to my Father in heaven, from where I came." The leading object of the sentence appears to be to excite in the minds of the Jews thought and inquiry about His divine nature. "I am one who came from heaven and am going back to heaven. Ought you not to inquire seriously who I am?"

Chrysostom thinks our Lord said this partly to shame and terrify the Jews, and partly to show them that His death would not be effected by their violence but by His own voluntary submission.

[*Ye shall seek Me...die in your sins.*] This means that His hearers would seek Him too late, having discovered too late that He was the Messiah whom they ought to have received. But the door of mercy would then be shut. They would seek in vain, because they had not known the day of their visitation. And the result would be that many of them would die miserably "in their sins"--with their sins upon them unpardoned and unforgiven.

[*Where I go ye cannot come.*] This must mean heaven, the everlasting abode

of glory which the Son had with the Father before He came into the world, which He left for a season when He became incarnate, and to which He returned when He had finished the work of man's redemption. To this a wicked man cannot come. Unbelief shuts him out. It is impossible in the nature of things that an unforgiven, unconverted, unbelieving man can go to heaven. The words in Greek are emphatic: "Ye *cannot* come."

The notion of Augustine and others, that "Ye shall seek Me" only means "Ye shall seek Me in order to kill Me, as ye are wishing to do now, but at last I shall be withdrawn from your reach," seems to be quite untenable. The "seeking," to my mind, can only be the too-late seeking of remorse. The theory of some, that it refers exclusively to the time of the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, seems to me equally untenable. My belief is that from the time that our Lord left the world down to this day, the expression has been peculiarly true of the Jewish nation. They have been perpetually, in a sense, "seeking" and hungering after a Messiah, and yet unable to find Him because they have not sought aright. In saying this we must carefully remember that our Lord did not mean to say that any of His hearers were too *sinful* and bad to be forgiven. On the contrary, not a few of them that crucified Him found mercy on the day of Pentecost, when Peter preached. (Acts ii.22-41.) But our Lord did mean to say prophetically that the Jewish nation, as a nation, would be specially hardened and unbelieving, and that many of them, though an elect remnant might be saved, would "die in their sins." In proof of this peculiar blindness and unbelief of the Jewish nation, we should study Acts xxviii.25-27, Rom. xi.7, and 1 Thes. ii.15,16. The Greek expression for "sins" in this verse confirms the view. It is not, literally rendered, "sins," but "sin:" your special sin of unbelief.

Let us note that it is possible to seek Christ too late or from a wrong motive, and so to seek Him in vain. This is a very important principle of Scripture. True repentance, doubtless, is never too late, but late repentance is seldom true. There is mercy to the uttermost in Christ, but if men willfully reject Him, turn away from Him, and put off seeking Him in earnest, there is such a thing as "seeking Christ" in vain. Such passages as Proverbs i.24-32, Matt. xxv.11-12, Luke xiii.24-27, Heb. vi.4-8, and x.26-31, ought to be carefully studied.

Let us note that our Lord teaches plainly that it is possible for men to "die in their sins," and never come to the heaven where He has gone. This is flatly contrary to the doctrine taught by some in the present day, that there is no hell and no future punishment, and all will finally go to heaven.

It is worthy of remark that our Lord's words, "Ye shall seek Me" and "Where I go ye cannot come," are used three times in this Gospel: twice to the unbelieving Jews (here and at vii.34), and once to the disciples (xiii.33). But the careful reader will observe that in the two first instances the expression is coupled with "Ye shall not find Me" and "Ye shall die in your sins." In the last, it evidently means the temporary separation between Christ and His disciples which would be caused by His ascension.

Melancthon observes that nothing seems to bring on men such dreadful guilt

and punishment as neglect of the Gospel. The Jews had Christ among them and would not believe, and so when afterward they sought they could not find.

Rollock observes that the "seeking" which our Lord here foretells was like that of Esau, when he sought too late for the lost birthright.

Burkitt observes: "Better a thousand times to die in a ditch than to die in our sins! They that die in their sins shall rise in their sins and stand before Christ in their sins. Such as lie down in sin in the grave shall have sin lie down with them in hell to all eternity. The sins of believers go to the grave before them; sin dies while they live. The sins of unbelievers go to the grave with them."

22.--[*Then the Jews said, etc.*] It is plain that this last saying of our Lord perplexed His enemies. It evidently implied something which they did not understand. In the preceding chapter (vii.34) they began speculating whether it meant that our Lord was going forth into the world to teach the Gentiles. Here they start another conjecture and begin to suspect that our Lord must mean His going into another world by death. But by what death did He think of going? Did He mean to "kill Himself"? It seems strange that they should start such an idea. But may it not be that their minds were occupied with their own plan of putting Him to death? "Will He really anticipate our plan by committing suicide and thus escape our hands?"

Origen suggests that the Jews had a tradition about the manner in which Messiah would die: viz., "that He would have power to depart at His own time and in a way of His own choosing."

Rupertus observes that afterwards at the siege of Jerusalem by Titus, many of the desperate Jews did the very thing they here said of our Lord--they killed themselves in madness of despair.

Melancthon remarks that nothing seems to anger wicked men so much as to be told they cannot come where Christ is.

23.--[*And He said...Ye are from beneath, etc.*] Our Lord's argument in this case appears to be as follows. "There is no union, harmony, or fellowship between you and Me. Your minds are entirely absorbed and buried in earth and objects of a mere earthly kind. You are from beneath and of this world, while I came from heaven and my heart is full of the things of heaven and my Father's business. No wonder, therefore, that I said you cannot come where I go and will die in your sins. Unless your hearts are changed and you learn to be of one mind with Me, you are totally unmeet for heaven and must at last die in your sins."

The expressions "from beneath" and "from above" are strong figurative phrases, intended to put in contrast earth and heaven. See Col. iii.1,2. The Greek phrases literally rendered would be, "Ye are from the things beneath; I am from the things above."

The expression "of this world" means bound up with and inseparably connected, by tastes, aims, and affections, with this world and nothing

else but this world. It is the character of one utterly dead and graceless, who looks at nothing but the world and lives for it. It is a character utterly at variance with that of our Lord, who was eminently "not of this world;" and therefore those who were of this character were incapable of union and friendship with Him.

Let it be noted that what our Lord says of Himself here is the very same thing that is said of His true disciples elsewhere. If a man has grace, he is "not of this world." (See John xv.19, xvii.16, and 1 John iv.5.) Christ's living members always have more or less of their Master's likeness in this respect. They are always more or less separated from and distinct from this world. He that is thoroughly worldly has the plainest mark of not being a member of Christ and a true Christian.

Theophylact observes that the strange notion of the Apollinarian heretics, that our Lord's body was not a real human body but came down from heaven, was built on this verse for one of its reasons. But, as he remarks, they might as well say the Apostles had not common human bodies since the same thing is said of them: "not of this world."

24.--[*Therefore I said, etc.*] This verse seems elliptical and must be filled up in some such manner as this: "It is because you are thoroughly earthly and of this world that I said, Ye cannot come where I go. You are not heavenly minded and cannot go to heaven but must go to your own place. The end will be that you will die in your sins. Not believing in Me as the Messiah, you cut yourselves off from all hope and must die in your sins. This, in short, is the root of all your misery--your unbelief."

Let it be noted that unbelief was the secret of the Jews being so thoroughly "of the world." If they would only have believed in Christ, they would have been "delivered from this present evil world." The victory that overcomes the world is faith. Once believing on a heavenly Savior, a man has a portion and a heart in heaven. (Gal. i.4, 1 John v.4,5.)

Let it be noted that there is nothing hard or uncharitable in warning men plainly of the consequences of unbelief. Never to speak of hell is not acting as Christ did.

The expression "Believe not that I am He" would be more literally rendered "Believe not that I am." Hence, some think that our Lord refers to the great name, well known to the Jews, under which God revealed Himself to Israel in Egypt: "Say to the children of Israel I AM has sent you." (Ex. iii.14.)

Augustine remarks that "the whole unhappiness of the Jews was not that they had sin, but to die in sins." He also observes, "In these words, 'Except ye believe that I am,' Jesus meant nothing short of this, 'Except ye believe that I am God, ye shall die in your sins.' It is well for us, thank God, that He said except ye *believe*, and not except ye *understand*."

Quesnel remarks: "It is a mistaken prudence to hide these dreadful truths from sinners for fear of casting them into despair by the force of God's judgments. We ought, on the contrary, to force them, by the sight of

danger, to throw themselves into the arms of Christ, the only refuge for sinners."

25.--[*Then they said to Him, Who are You?*] This question cannot have been an honest inquiry about our Lord's nature and origin. Our Lord had spoken so often of His Father--in the 5th chapter, for instance, when before the Council--that the Jews of Jerusalem must have known well enough who and what He claimed to be. It is far more likely that they hoped to elicit from Him some fresh declaration which they could lay hold of and make the ground of an accusation. Anger and malice seem at the bottom of the question: "Who are You that says such things of us? Who are You that undertakes to pronounce such condemnation on us?"

Ecolampadius thinks the question was asked sarcastically: "Who are you, indeed, to talk in this way?"

[*And Jesus said...even the same...beginning.*] Our Lord's reply here seems so guarded and cautious that it increases the probability of the Jews' question being put with a malicious intention. He knew their thoughts and designs, and answered them by reminding them what He had always said of Himself: "Why ask Me who I am? You know well what I have always said of myself. I am the same that I said to you from the beginning. I have nothing new to say."

Scott thinks it simply means, "I am the same that I told you at the beginning of this discourse--the Light of the World."

There is an undeniable difficulty and obscurity about the sentence before us, and it has consequently received three different interpretations. The difficulty arises chiefly from the word "beginning."

(a) Some think, as our own English version, Chrysostom, Calvin, Bucer, Gualter, Cartwright, Rollock, and Lightfoot, that "beginning" means the beginning of our Lord's ministry. "I am the same person that I told you I was from the very first beginning of my ministry among you." This view is confirmed by the Septuagint rendering of Gen. xliii.18,20.

(b) Some think, as Theophylact, Melancthon, Aretus, and Musculus, that "beginning" is an adverb and means simply, "as an opening or beginning statement." "First of all, as a commencement of my reply, I tell you that I am what I always said I was."

(c) Some think, as Augustine, Rupertus, Toletus, Ferus, Jansenius, Lampe, and Wordsworth, that "beginning" is a substantive and means the Beginning of all things, the personal Beginning, like "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the end." (Rev. i.8, xxi.6, xxii.13.) It would then mean, "I am the great beginning of all things, the eternal God, as I always said."

The reader must exercise his own judgment on these three views. The extreme brevity and conciseness of the Greek words make it very hard to give a decided opinion upon them. On the whole, I prefer the view taken by our translators. In three other places in St. John's Gospel our Lord

speaks of His early ministry as "the beginning." (John vi.64, xv.27, xvi.4.) In no place in St. John's Gospel does He ever call Himself "the beginning." As to the second view, that it only means "First of all, as an opening statement," it seems to be so meager, flat, and bald that I cannot think it is correct.

Rollock, who takes the view of our English version, observes what a bright example our Lord here sets to all Christians, and especially to ministers, of always telling the same story and witnessing one and the same confession without variation.

26.--[*I have many things, etc.*] This verse, again, is very elliptical. The meaning seems to be as follows: "You marvel and are angry at my saying that you are from beneath and will die in your sin and cannot come where I go. You ask who I am who speaks and judges in this manner. But I tell you that I have many other things that I might say, and other judgments that I might pronounce about you. But I forbear now. Yet I tell you that He who sent Me is the one true God, and I only speak to the world things which I have heard of Him and am commissioned by Him to proclaim. He who sent Me will prove them to be true one day."

The general idea seems to be, that our Lord defends His right to speak decidedly and pronounce judgment on His enemies' conduct on the ground of His divine mission. "I have a right to say what I have said, and I might say much more, because I am not a common prophet but am commissioned and sent as the Word of the Father."

The frequency with which our Lord speaks of Himself as "sent by the Father," in St. John's Gospel, should be carefully noticed.

When our Lord speaks of Himself as "hearing" things from the Father, we must remember that His language is accommodated to our understanding. The relation between the Father and the Son in the Trinity is something too mysterious for us fully to comprehend. The Son does not really and literally need the Father to "speak" to Him and does not himself need to "hear" Him. The first and second Persons in the Trinity are ineffably united, though two distinct Persons.

Lightfoot thinks the latter part of this verse means: "He who sent Me has of old said and judged of you, and He is true, and they are true things that He said. Of this kind are the passages Isaiah xi.10 and xxix.10, and from such predictions Christ concludes thus, 'Ye shall die in your sins.'"

27.--[*They did not understand, etc.*] Why the Jews who heard these words did not comprehend that our Lord spoke of the "Father" is not clear. They must have thought that "He who sent Me" meant some earthly sender. The extent to which our Lord's hearers sometimes understood Him, as in John v.18, and sometimes did not understand Him, as here, is a curious subject.

Alford observes, "There is no accounting for the ignorance of unbelief, as any minister of Christ knows by painful experience."

28.--[*Then Jesus said, etc.*] This verse is prophetic. Our Lord predicts

that after His crucifixion the Jews would know that He was the Messiah, that He had done all He had done not of His own private authority but by God's commission, and that He had spoken to the world only such things as the Father had taught and appointed Him to speak. But whether our Lord meant that His hearers would really believe with the heart and really confess His Messiahship, or that they would know it too late and be convinced when the day of grace was past and gone, is a nice and difficult question.

My own opinion, judging from the context and the analogy of other places, is in favor of the latter view: viz., that our Lord predicted the Jewish nation would know the truth and discover their own mistake too late. I think so because our Lord seems so frequently to allude to the light which would come on the minds of the Jewish nation at large after His death. They would be convinced though not converted.

Chrysostom thinks that our Lord meant: "Do you expect that you shall certainly rid yourselves of Me, and slay Me? I tell you that then ye shall most surely know that I am, by reason of the miracle of my resurrection, and the destruction of Jerusalem. When ye have been driven away from your place of worship, and it is not even allowed you to serve God as hitherto, then ye shall know that He does this to avenge Me, and because He is wroth with those who would not hear Me."

Augustine takes the other side and says: "Without doubt Jesus saw there some whom He knew, whom in His foreknowledge He had elected together with His other saints before the foundation of the world, that after His passion they should believe."

Euthymius (agreeing with Chrysostom) remarks how the crowds that saw our Lord crucified and returned home smiting their breasts, the centurion who superintended His crucifixion, the chief priests who tried in vain to stifle the report of His resurrection, and Josephus the historian who attributed the misfortunes of the nation to their murder of Christ, were all witnesses to the truth of this verse. When too late, they knew who our Lord was.

Alford thinks that the words admit of a double fulfillment and that the Jews were to "know" that Jesus was the Christ in two different ways. Some would know by being converted, some by being punished and judged.

The expression "lifted up" both here and elsewhere in St. John's Gospel can mean nothing but our Lord's crucifixion and lifting up on the cross. (John iii.14 and xii.32.) It is never used in any other sense, and the modern habit of talking of Christ as "lifted up" when magnified and exalted in the pulpit, is a total misapprehension and a play upon words.

Rollock and others think that the phrase "lifted up" may fairly include all the consequences and effects of our Lord's crucifixion, such as His second advent to judge the world, and that this will be the time when the unbelieving will at last know and be convinced that Christ is Lord of all. But the idea seems far-fetched.

The expression "then ye shall know" may possibly refer both to our Lord's resurrection as well as His crucifixion. Certainly the rising again from the dead silenced our Lord's enemies in a way that nothing else ever did.

The expression "that I am He" here as elsewhere might be equally well rendered "that I am:" that I am the great "I AM," the Messiah.

The phrase "that I do nothing of myself" is the same that we have had frequently before, as in John v.19,30. It means, "that I do nothing of my own independent authority." The reference is to the perfect union between the Son and the Father.

The expression, "as my Father has taught Me I speak these things," again bears special reference to the divine commission of our Lord and the perfect union between Himself and His Father. "I do not speak the things I speak of myself and by my own authority only. I speak nothing but what my Father has taught, commissioned, and appointed Me to speak." (Compare the 7th, 16th, and 26th verses of this chapter.)

Augustine says here: "Do not, as it were, represent to yourselves two men: the one father, the other son, and the father speaking to the son as you do when you say certain words to your son, advising and instructing him how to speak that whatever he has heard from you he may commit to memory, and having committed to memory utter also with the tongue. Do not so conceive. Stature and motion of the body, the office of the tongue, distinction of sounds, do not go about to conceive them in the Trinity." Again: "Incorporeally the Father spoke to the Son, because incorporeally the Father begat the Son. And He taught Him not as if He had begotten Him ignorant and in need of teaching; but this 'taught' is the same as 'begat Him knowing.'"

29.--[*And He who sent Me, etc.*] This verse contains, once more, that deep and oft-repeated truth--the entire unity between God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the consequent entire and complete harmony between the mind of the Father and the mind of the Son. It contains, moreover, that entire and complete performance of the Father's will by the Son and that perfect righteousness, obedience, and holiness, wherewith the Father is well-pleased.

When we read such words as "He who sent Me is with Me" and "has not left Me alone," we must remember that there is much in them which we cannot fully explain. We must be content to believe that the Father was "with" the Son and never "left" Him during the whole period of His incarnation, in an ineffable and inscrutable manner. Perhaps also there is a reference to Isaiah 1.7,8,9.

Augustine remarks: "Albeit both are together, yet one was sent and the other did send. The Father sent the Son, yet quitted not the Son."

When we read such words as "I always do those things that please Him," we must see in the expression a description of that spotless perfection with which the Son during His incarnation constantly pleased the eternal Father.

Let Christians never forget the practical lesson: that in this verse, as in many other places, Christ is their example and their encouragement. Like Him, however short they may come, let them aim at "always doing what pleases God." Like Him, let them be sure that by so doing they will find the Father "with them," and will never be left quite "alone."

Calvin remarks: "This is the courage with which we ought to be animated in the present day: that we may not give way on account of the small number of believers. For though the whole world be opposed to His doctrine, still we are not alone. Hence, it is evident how foolish is the boasting of the Papists who, while they neglect God, proudly boast of their vast numbers."

30.--[*As He spoke these words, many believed on Him.*] There can be little doubt that "these words" in this place refer to the whole discourse which was delivered at this time, and not to the single verse which immediately precedes this one. It is possible that the reference to Isa. 1.7,8,9 may have brought light to the Jews' minds, and explained our Lord's relation to the Father and His claim to be received as the Messiah. Otherwise, it is not very clear what it was that made "many believe" on Him at this juncture. There is, however, no reason to think that the "belief" here was anything more than a head belief that our Lord was the Messiah. That many did so believe whose hearts remained unchanged, there can be little doubt. The same expression occurs at x.42 and xi.45 and xii.42. The extent to which men may be intellectually convinced of the truth of religion and know their duty, while their hearts are unrenewed and they continue in sin, is one of the most painful phenomena in the history of human nature. Let us never be content with believing things to be true, without a personal laying hold on the living Person, Christ Jesus, and actually following Him.

Chrysostom observes: "They believed, yet not as they ought, but carelessly and by chance, being pleased and refreshed by the humility of the words. For that they had not perfect faith, the Evangelist shows by their speeches after this, in which they insult Him again. Theophylact, Zwingle, and Calvin take the same view.