

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
8:48-59

48. Then the Jews answered and said to him, Do we not say rightly that you are a Samaritan and have a devil? 49. Jesus answered, I do not have a devil; but I honor my Father, and ye dishonor me. 50. And I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks and judges. 51. Verily, verily, I say to you, If a man keeps my word he shall never see death. 52. Then the Jews said to him, Now we know that you have a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and you say, If a man keeps my word he shall never taste of death. 53. Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do you make yourself out to be? 54. Jesus answered, If I honor myself, my honor is nothing. It is my Father who honors me, of whom ye say that he is your God. 55. Yet ye have not known him; but I know him. And if I should say, I do not know him, I shall be a liar like you; but I know him and keep his word. 56. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw *it* and was glad. 57. Then the Jews said to him, You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham? 58. Jesus said to them, Verily, verily I say to you, before Abraham was, I am. 59. Then they took up stones to cast at him; but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

48.--[*Then the Jews answered...devil.*] This verse seems to contain nothing but personal abuse and blasphemous slander. Unable to answer our Lord's arguments, the unbelieving Jews lost their temper and resorted to the last weapon of a disputant--senseless invective and calling of names. The extent to which calling names is carried by Oriental people, even in the present day, is something far greater than we can imagine in this country.

When the Jews called our Lord "a Samaritan," they meant much the same as saying that He was no true Jew and little better than a heathen. "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans." (John iv.9.) When they said, "You have a devil," I think it meant rather more than "You are mad," as in John vii.20, if we observe the following verse. It probably implied, "You act and speak under the influence of the devil. The power You have is from Satan and not from God."

Let us learn here how little cause Christians have to be surprised if hard names and insulting epithets are applied to them. It is only what was done to their Master and is no ground for discouragement in doing God's work.

49.--[*Jesus answered, I have not a devil, etc.*] Our Lord's answer to the coarse invective of His enemies amounts to this: "In saying that I have a devil, you say that which is not true. I am simply honoring my Father in heaven by delivering His message to man; and you, by your violent language, are dishonoring Me and in effect dishonoring and insulting my Father. Your insults do not strike Me only, but my Father also."

Let us note our Lord's calmness and equanimity under insult. A solemn denial of the blasphemous charge laid against Him and an equally solemn reminder that He was honoring the God whom they themselves professed to worship, are the only reply He condescends to make.

50.--[*And I do not seek my own glory.*] This sentence seems to arise out of the last verse. "Ye dishonor Me; but you do not move or hurt Me, for I did not come to seek my own glory but the glory of Him who sent Me. I receive not honor from men." (See John vii.18 and v.41.) Here, as elsewhere, our Lord points to the great principle "that a true messenger from heaven will never seek his own glory but his Master's."

[*There is one that seeks and judges.*] There is a very solemn warning in these words. They mean: "There is One, however, even my Father in heaven, who does seek and desire my glory; and not only seeks but judges the conduct of all who dishonor Me, with deep displeasure, and will punish it at the last day."

There is comfort here for all Christ's members, as well as for their Head. Though they may not think of it, there is One in heaven who cares deeply for them, sees all they go through, and will one day plead their cause. The latent thought seems the same as in Eccl. v.8: "He who is higher than the highest regards." A believer may cheer himself with the thought, "There is One who judges. There is One who sees all, who cares for me and will set all right at the last day."

Euthymius remarks on this verse that we should not heed things said against ourselves, but should vindicate the honor of God if things are said against God.

51.--[*Verily...keeps my word...never see death.*] The mighty promise contained in this verse seems intended to wind up the whole conversation. All that our Lord had said had produced no effect. He therefore closes His teaching for the present by one of those mighty sayings which tower above everything near them, and of which St. John's Gospel contain so many: "Whether you will hear or not, whether you choose to know Me or not, I solemnly tell you that if any man receives, believes, and keeps my doctrine, he shall never see death. Despised and rejected as I am by you, life or death, heaven or hell, blessing or cursing depends and hinge on accepting the message I proclaim to you. I am the way, the truth, and the life." It is like Moses taking leave of Israel and saying, "I call heaven and earth to record against you that I have set before you life and death." (Deut. xxx.15,19.) Just so our Lord seems to say, "I tell you once more, for the last time, that to keep my saying is the way to escape death."

The expression is parallel to the one our Lord uses in the synagogue of Capernaum. There He says, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life." Here it is "shall never see death." (John vi.47.)

We should note here, as elsewhere, that when our Lord uses the expression, "Verily, verily, I say to you," which is familiar to all careful readers of St. John's Gospel, He is always about to say something of peculiar gravity and solemnity. See John i.51, ii.3,5,11, v.19,24,25, vi.26,32,47,53,

viii.34,51,58, x.1,7, xii.24, xiii.16,20,21,38, xiv.12, xvi.20,23, xxi.18.

The expression "keeps my saying," means "receive into his heart, believe, embrace, obey, and hold fast the doctrine or message which I am commissioned to teach." The phrase "my saying," means much more than the "words I am speaking at this moment." It is rather "the whole doctrine of my Gospel."

The expression "never see death" cannot be taken literally. Our Lord did not mean that His disciples would not die and be buried like other children of Adam. We know that they did die. The meaning is probably three-fold. (1) "He shall be completely delivered from that spiritual death of condemnation under which all mankind are born: his soul is alive and can die no more. (2) He shall be delivered from the sting of bodily death: his flesh and bones may sink under disease and be laid in the grave, but the worst part of death shall not be able to touch him, and the grave itself shall give him up one day. (3) He shall be delivered entirely from the second death, even eternal punishment in hell: over him the second death shall have no power.

The width and greatness of this promise are very remarkable. Ever since the day of Adam's fall, death has been man's peculiar enemy. Man has found the truth of the sentence, "In the day you eat, you shall surely die." (Gen. ii.17.) But our Lord boldly and openly proclaims that in keeping His saying there is complete deliverance from death. In fact, He proclaims Himself the One greater than death. None could say this but a Redeemer who was very God.

Augustine says: "The death from which our Lord came to deliver us was the second death, eternal death, the death of hell, the death of damnation with the devil and his angels. That is indeed death; for this death of ours is only a migration. What is it but a putting off a heavy load, provided there be not another load carried by which the man shall be cast headlong into hell. This is the death of which the Lord says, 'He shall not see death.'"

Let us note the breadth and fullness of this promise. It is for anyone who keeps Christ's word: "If a man," or as it rather should be rendered, "If any man."

Let us beware of putting a meaning on this promise which it was not intended to convey. The idea of some--that it means "believers shall be so completely delivered from death that they shall neither feel bodily pain nor mental conflict"--is one that cannot be supported. It is not borne out by other passages of Scripture, and as a matter of fact it is contradicted by experience. The Gospel delivers believers from that "fear of death" which unbelievers feel, no doubt. (Heb. ii.15.) But we have no right to expect believers to have no bodily conflict, no convulsion, no struggle, and no suffering. Flesh and blood must and will feel. "I groan" said holy Baxter on his deathbed, "but I do not grumble." Death is a serious thing, even though the sting is taken away.

Parkhurst thinks the expression here is like Luke ii.26, where it was said

of Simeon that he should not "see death." But the Greek for "see" there is a different word, and the phrase there seems to mean nothing more than "die," which does not come up to the full promise here. He also quotes Psalms xlix.9 and lxxxix.49. But neither of these places seem parallel.

The Greek word rendered "see" is so peculiar that one might almost think the phrase meant, "He shall not gaze upon and behold death forever to all eternity, as the wicked shall." But I prefer the threefold sense already given.

52.--[*Then the Jews said, etc.*] The argument of the Jews in this verse seems to be as follows. "We know now by Your own words that You are mad and have a devil. Our great father Abraham and the prophets, holy and good as they all were, are all dead; and yet You presume to say that if a man keeps Your word he will never die. In short, You make Yourself greater than Abraham for Abraham could not escape death, while keeping Your word enables a man to escape death. To talk in this way is a plain proof that you are mad."

The phrase "to have a devil" in this place can hardly mean anything but "to be mad or crazy."

The Jews, it will be observed, do not quote our Lord's words correctly. He had said, "shall never see death." They report Him as saying "shall never taste of death." Whether this was a willful perversion of His words is rather difficult to decide. Some think that the Jews intentionally exaggerated the promise and put "taste" for "see" in order to magnify the offense our Lord had committed. Others think that the difference means nothing, and that it only shows how thoroughly the Jews misunderstood our Lord and thought that He referred to nothing but bodily death.

Here, as elsewhere, we may remark how ready the Jews were to pervert and warp our Lord's meaning and to put a carnal and gross sense on spiritual language.

53.--[*Are You greater, etc.*] The question in this verse shows that our Lord had again succeeded in arousing the curiosity of the Jews and stirring them to inquire about His nature and person. "Who are You who talks in this way? Whom do You make Yourself out to be? To say that those who keep Your word shall never die is to make Yourself superior to Abraham and the prophets, who are all dead. Who and what are You? Are You really someone greater than Abraham?"

Chrysostom observes that the question of the Jews reminds us of the Samaritan woman's question: "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" (John iv.12.)

54.--[*If I honor myself, etc.*] Our Lord's meaning in this verse seems to be as follows: "If at any time I take to myself and claim honor, such honor would be worthless. He who puts honor on Me and commissions Me to say that keeping my word shall deliver a man from death is my Father in heaven--that very Being whom you profess to call your God. It is your own God--the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--who has put such honor on Me that life or

death turn on keeping my word and believing on Me."

Here, as elsewhere, we should mark the carefulness with which our Lord disclaims all self-exaltation and desire for glory and honor from man. If in claiming for Himself to hold the keys of life and death He seems to claim honor, He carefully reminds the Jews that it is an honor put on Him by the Father in heaven, even by their own God. He desired no honor independent of Him or in rivalry to Him.

When our Lord says "My Father honors Me," the expression must include all the works, signs, and miracles which the Father gave Him to do, as well as the words which He gave Him to speak. (John v.36, xiv.10,11.)

55.--[*Yet ye have not known Him, etc.*] The meaning of this verse seems to be as follows: "Although you say of my Father in heaven that He is your God, you do not really know Him and are plainly ignorant of His character, will, and purposes. Professing to know Him, in works you deny Him. But I, on the contrary, know Him perfectly, for I am indeed one with Him from all eternity and came forth from Him. So perfectly do I know Him, that I should be a liar and a child of the devil, like yourselves, if I said I did not know Him. But I repeat that I know Him perfectly, and in all my words and works here on earth I carefully keep His word and observe the commission He gave Me."

There is undeniably a great peculiarity in the language of this verse. But it is probably a Hebrew mode of putting in strong contrast the Jews' thorough ignorance of God, notwithstanding their high profession of being His chosen people, and our Lord's perfect knowledge of God, notwithstanding the repeated assertions that He had a devil, was a Samaritan, and was consequently an enemy to the God of Israel. The phrase, "I should be a liar, like yourselves, if I said I did not know the Father," was just the phrase to convey the strongest idea to the Jews' minds of our Lord's knowledge. In arguing with some men, nothing but the strongest language and the most paradoxical expressions have any effect. Even God himself thinks it good to make such an asseveration as "I swear by myself" and "as I live" in order to command attention. (Jer. xxii.5, Heb. vi.13, Ezek. xxxiii.11.) Those who blame ministers and preachers for using strong language, and say that they should never use any but gentle, tame, and mild phrases, can hardly have studied human nature or the style of Scripture with thorough attention.

56.--[*Your father Abraham, etc.*] Our Lord in this verse takes up the question of the Jews as to His being greater than Abraham and boldly gives an answer. "You ask Me whether I am greater than Abraham. I tell you in reply that I am He whose coming and whose day of glory Abraham rejoiced to think he should see. Moreover, by faith he even saw it; and when he saw it he was glad."

The precise meaning of the words of this verse is rather difficult to discover, though the general idea of it is plain and unmistakable. It is clear that our Lord implies that He is the promised Messiah, the Seed of Abraham, in whom all the generations of the earth should be blessed, and of whom when Abraham first heard, "he laughed" for joy. (Gen. xvii.17.)

(a) Some think, as most of the Fathers and Reformers, that it means: "Abraham rejoiced in the prospect of seeing, at some future time, my day, the day of Messiah; and by faith he did see it afar off."

(b) Some think, as Maldonatus, Lampe, Stier, and Bloomfield, that it means: "Abraham rejoiced when he was told that he should see my day; and he actually has seen it in Paradise, and has been gladdened there in the separate state by the sight."

(c) Some think, as Brown, Olshausen, Alford, Webster, and Hengstenberg, that it means: "Abraham's great desire and joyful expectation was to see my day, and he actually saw Me when I appeared to him and talked with him on earth."

Of these three views, the first appears to me the most probable and most in keeping with the history of Abraham in Genesis. It should be carefully observed that our Lord does *not* say that "Abraham saw ME," but that "he saw my day." The cause of Abraham's joy seems to have been that there was to be of his seed a Messiah, a Savior; and that he should see His day--the day of the Lord, the triumphant day of Messiah's complete victory and restitution of all things. This day he even saw by faith afar off, and was glad at the sight. Our Lord's object does not seem to me to be to tell the Jews that Abraham had seen Him, but that He was "the Seed," the Messiah who was promised to their father Abraham. The Jews had asked whether he was greater than Abraham. "Yes!" he replies, "I am. I am that very Messiah whose day Abraham rejoiced to hear of and saw afar off by faith. If you were like Abraham, you would rejoice to see Me."

Chrysostom and Euthymius think that "my day" in this verse means "the day of the crucifixion, which Abraham foreshadowed typically by offering the ram in Isaac's place." This, however, seems a very cramped and limited view.

Rupertus thinks that Abraham "saw the day of Christ" when he entertained the three angels who came to him.

Augustine thinks it may refer to both advents of Christ: first in humiliation, and second in glory.

57.--[*Then the Jews said...not yet fifty, etc.*] It is plain that the Jews here put a wrong meaning on our Lord's words and suppose Him to say that Abraham had seen Him, and He had seen Abraham. Yet our Lord had only said, "Abraham saw my day." It is another instance of their readiness to pervert His words.

When the Jews said, "You are not yet fifty years old," I believe they only meant, "You are not yet a middle-aged man." Fifty years old was the turning point in life, at which the Levites and priests were excused from further active service in the tabernacle. (Numbers iv.4.) I fancy the reference is to this. Our Lord was at this time about thirty-three years old, or at most thirty-four. The notion of Irenaeus and Papias, that He really was fifty before He was crucified, is utterly without warrant and absurd.

Some think that our Lord's countenance was so marred and aged by sorrow and care that He looked much older than He really was, and that hence the Jews supposed Him to be nearly fifty. But I prefer the former view.

Euthymius thinks that the Jews thought our Lord was fifty years old on account of His great wisdom and experience. This, however, seems a weak and untenable view.

58.--[*Jesus said...before Abraham was, I am.*] This famous verse, I believe, can only receive one honest interpretation. It is a distinct assertion of our Lord's eternity--His existence before all creation. "I solemnly declare to you that before Abraham was and existed I was, the great I AM; the same yesterday, today, and forever: the eternal God." All attempts to evade this explanation appear to me so preposterous that it is a waste of time to notice them. The man who can think the words only mean "I am He who was promised to Adam before Abraham was born," seems past the reach of reasoning. The name "I AM," we must remember, is the very name by which God revealed Himself to the Jews when He sent Moses to them: "Say unto the children of Israel, I AM has sent me." (Exod. iii.14.)

Let us carefully note what a strong proof we have here of the pre-existence and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. He applies to Himself the very name by which God made Himself known when He undertook to redeem Israel. It was "I AM" who brought them out of the land of Egypt. It was "I AM" who died for us upon the cross. The amazing strength of the foundation of a sinner's hope appears here. Believing on Jesus we rest on divinity, on One who is God as well as man.

There is a difference in the Greek verbs here employed which we should carefully notice. The Greek for "was" is quite different from the Greek for "am." It is as if our Lord said, "Before Abraham was born, I have an existence individual and eternal."

Chrysostom observes: "He said not before Abraham was, I was, but I am. As the Father uses this expression I AM, so also does Christ, for it signifies continuous being, irrespective of all time; on which account the expression seemed to the Jews blasphemous."

Augustine says: "In these words acknowledge the Creator and discern the creature. He that spoke was made the Seed of Abraham; and that Abraham might be, He was before Abraham."

Gregory remarks: "Divinity has no past or future, but always the present; and therefore Jesus does not say, Before Abraham was I *was*, but I *am*."

59.--[*Then they took up stones to cast at him.*] It is clear that the Jews, at any rate, had no doubt what our Lord meant in the preceding verse, whatever modern Socinians may think. They saw and knew at once that He who spoke to them boldly claimed to be Jehovah, and One far greater than Abraham, being very God. This they did not believe, and therefore regarded Him as a blasphemer who ought at once to be stoned. In their rage and fury, they immediately took up stones, which were probably lying about on account of repairs to the temple, in order to stone Him. The whole

proceeding appears to have been a tumultuous and disorderly one, not regularly conducted but sudden and unauthorized, like the stoning of Stephen afterwards. (Acts vii.58.)

[*But Jesus hid Himself, etc.*] I think this withdrawal can only be regarded as miraculous. The Greek word rendered "hid Himself" is literally "was hid." It seems most improbable that our Lord could "pass by" and "go through the midst" of an angry crowd, whose eyes had for a long time been fixed and concentrated on Him, without being seen and stopped, unless there was a miraculous interposition. I believe that the eyes of His enemies were holden, and that they did not know Him for a season, or that by His own almighty power He rendered Himself temporarily invisible. It is only what He did at Nazareth on a similar occasion (Luke iv.30); and if we once concede that our Lord could work miracles at His will, there seems no reason to suppose that He would not work one on this occasion.

Let us note that our Lord's enemies could do nothing to Him until His hour was come for suffering. When He was at last taken prisoner, brought before Pilate, and crucified, it was not because He could not escape, but because He would not. What He did here He might have done there.

Let us note that it is not always the path of duty and of real obedience to God's will to sit still and submit to sufferings and death. It may be the will of God that we should "flee to some other city" and avoid death. (Matt. x.23.) To court martyrdom and throw away life when it might be saved is not always the duty of a servant of Christ. Some of the martyrs of the primitive Church appear to have forgotten this.

Augustine says: "Jesus did not hide Himself in a corner of the temple as if He were afraid, or take refuge in a house or run behind a wall or a pillar. But by His heavenly power He made Himself invisible to His enemies and went through the midst of them."

The argument of Maldonatus, that this verse proves the possibility of Christ being corporally present in the Lord's Supper in the bread, is so preposterous that it requires no refutation. There is no positive proof that our Lord was actually invisible here. It is quite possible that the eyes of His enemies were "holden that they could not know Him." (Luke xxiv.16.) If He was invisible, Maldonatus proves too much. The bread in the Lord's Supper is seen, and after consecration the Roman Catholic says its substance is changed. But it is not invisible.

In leaving this remarkable chapter, we should not fail to notice the difficulties under which our Lord's public ministry was carried on. Ten times between the 12th verse and the 59th we find His enemies interrupting, contradicting, or reviling Him. Our Master's calm dignity and perfect meekness under all this "contradiction of sinners" ought to be a never-forgotten example to His disciples.

It is a wise remark of Pascal that our Lord's enemies, by their incessant cavilling and interruption both here and elsewhere, have supplied us unintentionally with a strong proof of the truth of His teaching. If our Lord's doctrines had only been delivered privately to a prejudiced audience

of kind and loving disciples, they would not come down to us with the same weight that they do now. But they were often proclaimed in the midst of bitter enemies, learned Scribes and Pharisees who were ready to detect any flaw or defect in His reasoning. That the enemies of Christ could never answer or silence Him is a strong evidence that His doctrine was God's own truth. It was from heaven and not from men.