

THE CHOICE

by Ray C. Stedman

We have reached the conclusion of the remarkable words of Jesus in his dialogue with the Jewish leaders in the temple courts in Jerusalem at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles. This marvelous eighth chapter of John is described by Dr. William Barclay as "a chapter which passes from lightning flash to lightning flash of astonishment." Have you ever been out in an electrical storm when the lightning was just overhead, every flash illuminating the whole sky? Here Jesus is making various claims about himself, and each is one lightning flash after another, increasing in intensity. To these angry Jewish leaders he makes claim after claim, each one more astonishing than the last, each one forcing them to either fall down and worship him or stoop down and pick up stones to stone him!

The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I have not a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it and he will be the judge." {John 8:48-50 RSV}

In Verse 47 Jesus had told these men, "the reason why you do not hear my words is that you are not of God." That was a startling and stinging rebuke to men who considered themselves experts on God -- rather like telling the president of McDonalds, "You don't know anything about hamburgers!" The response of the Jews was predictable: "Why you talk like a Samaritan," they charged. "That is what the Samaritans say about the Jews; they claim we don't know God. But we know they make that claim because they are a demon-possessed people. If you talk that way you must be a Samaritan and therefore you must have a demon, too." It is clear that they are filled with rage at Jesus for the way he has exposed their hypocrisies. So they stoop to name-calling. That is always the last resort of someone who is losing an argument -- a personal attack on his antagonist.

Notice how beautifully our Lord responds in simple denial, "I have not a demon." Then he commits his reputation to the Father: "I do not seek my own glory. There is one who seeks it, and he will be the judge." There is no retaliation on his part, no name-calling in return, no getting angry and striking back.

We all know how easy it is to get angry and retaliate when we are attacked. Years ago when I first went to Hawaii I was told about a couple of native taxicab drivers whose cabs collided one day. One of them said to the other, in the pidgin English they use in the Islands, "Hey, whatsamatter you?" The other said, "Whatsamatter me? Whatsamatter you? You whatsamatter!" That is the way most of us feel when we are attacked. But Jesus never acted that way. In the words of Peter, "When he was reviled, he reviled not again, but committed himself to him who judges righteously," {cf, 1 Pet 2:23}.

This is a wonderful example of how to handle personal attack. He makes the claim, "I honor my Father," and how does he honor him? He puts revenge back into his Father's hand! He refuses to respond on behalf of himself, but leaves all vengeance to the Father. I don't know how that strikes you, but it shames me when I think of how quick I often am to defend myself when I am attacked.

Then Jesus goes on to make an even greater claim:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, as did the prophets; and you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you claim to be?" {John 8:51-53 RSV}

The words "Truly, truly, I say to you," always indicate a fundamental fact, an absolute certainty, which Jesus wants to emphasize. Here he uses this formula to underline the words, "If anyone keeps my word, he will

never see death." When you stop to think that everyone in this room will ultimately die, you can see what a marvelous claim this is. Here is One who has conquered death. He does not say, "He who keeps my word will never die," because Christians do die. What he says is that when they die they will not "see death." He even makes use of a double negative to emphasize his claim, "He will never, ever see death." That is a very powerful expression.

What Jesus means, of course, is that though Christians die (and not all who call themselves Christians are included in this, but only those who "keep his words," those who are truly his disciples), they will not see death; they will pass from life to instant glory. On his death bed, D. L. Moody, the great evangelist, exclaimed, "Earth is receding; heaven is approaching. This is my crowning day." I can recall several people from this congregation who, before they died, gave the clearest indication that they were not going from life into coldness and darkness, but into glory, into instant happiness.

That is what our Lord promises here. Christians like that pass from life to LIFE -- life full and free and wonderfully realized. But the implication of our Lord is that to die without Christ is to pass from death -- for that is what life on this earth is, a form of death ("She who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives,") -- to DEATH, what the book of Revelation calls "the second death," {Rev 2:11, 20:6, 20:14, 21:8}. People do not like to hear things like this today. Some of you may be saying, "Are you going to preach hellfire and brimstone to us?" It is not I, but the Scripture that gives that warning. The good news, of course, is that there is a way out of DEATH. This is what our Lord speaks of.

In my many years as a pastor I have learned to look forward to Christian funerals, or Memorial Services. They are usually very pleasant and wonderful experiences. Yes, there are tears. We grieve over those to whom we must bid at least a temporary good-bye. There is a sense of loss. But underlying everything else there is a great sense of triumph, of rejoicing that someone has finished his course and has entered into the glory which God has prepared. This is the promise of Jesus. I have stood at the edge of many a grave and felt in my heart the full impact of Paul's word, "O grave, where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting?" {cf, 1 Cor 15:55 KJV}. There is no sting in the death of the believer.

Bob Roe shared a wonderful word at the recent Memorial Service for our dear sister, Betsy Olaine. He said that as he read in the Scriptures about the glories of heaven he often thought to himself, "How wonderful! All those people to see and things to do." For many years he thought his reaction when he got there would be, "Wow!" But then he said that, as he began to think more deeply, especially about such verses as "absent from the body and at home with the Lord" {cf, 2 Cor 5:8}, his concept changed. He said when he gets home after an exhausting day's work he does not say, "Wow." What he says is "Whew!" Now he thinks that when he gets to heaven his reaction will be "Whew!" That is what it will truly be like. Christians will never taste death because they will be coming home. Their reaction will be, "Whew! home at last."

The Jews were staggered by Jesus' claim, "He who keeps my word will never see death." They responded in the same way we sometimes respond when we feel angered at someone's empty boast, "Who do you think you are anyway?" That is their retort, "Who do you think you are? You talk about never seeing death. Why, Abraham died. All the great names of the past, Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the prophets died. Are you greater than Abraham? Do you think you are greater than the prophets Who do you claim to be?"

To that Jesus replies, "Why don't you ask God who I am? You claim to know him well. Why don't you ask him?"

Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say that he is your God." {John 8:54 RSV}

In the words, "It is my Father who glorifies me," he is hinting at the resurrection that is to come; that would be the moment of his glorification. In Chapter 12 of this gospel, when Jesus realizes that his time has come, he says as much: "The hour has come when the Son of man shall be glorified," {cf, John 12:23}. These men did not understand that. Perhaps even his disciples did not at this point. But it is clear that he understood it, and he is basing his power to relieve those who know him from the fear of death on the fact that he has conquered death in himself. On another occasion he said of himself, "I have power to lay down my life, and I have power

to take it again." In anticipation of the miracle of his resurrection from the dead, he declares himself to be the One who has conquered death for all who follow him. Through the many centuries since, millions of people have died with that wonderful pillow to lay their heads upon, the hope of glory to come beyond this life.

A still more wonderful claim by Jesus follows immediately:

"But you have not known him [God]; I know him. If I said, I do not know him, I should be a liar like you; but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad." {John 8:55-56 RSV}

Here he claims to be the Intimate of God, the One who thoroughly knows God because he has been with him from the very beginning. "Abraham is my credential, my proof of that," he declares. "Abraham looked forward, saw my day, and approved of me 2,500 years before I came. He understood who I am and what I am here to do, and when he saw it he rejoiced."

Imagine the impact this claim made upon these men. They must have looked at Jesus in absolute consternation, their eyes bulging, their mouths falling open at this staggering, audacious claim. Abraham himself bore witness to who he was!

This greatly helps us understand how to read the Old Testament. Most people read it feeling a little sorry for those who lived before the cross because they could not see all that we see. They think of people in those times as having lived in a kind of murky darkness about the truth, with only an occasional ray of light given them now and then. But this statement of Jesus indicates that the Old Testament believers saw the Lord very clearly indeed. From this we can see that he fills the whole of the Old Testament.

When you read it, look for evidences and manifestations of the presence of Jesus. You will find them on every page. He can be seen in every king of Israel; he is prefigured in every prophet who spoke; he is spoken of in every sacrifice on every Jewish altar; he is described in every ritual which they performed; he is foreseen in the Tabernacle and the Temple; he is anticipated by every longing and yearning expressed in the Old Testament for something better than men already had. He is the only One, as he declares here, who fully knows and understands both God and man. He is the Intimate of God. What a remarkable claim!

But then he goes on to the most stunning and incredible claim of all.

The Jews then said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you [There it is again: Unmistakable fact, foundational certainty], Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple. {John 8:57-59 RSV}

That is one of the most remarkable statements in all of Scripture. Do not let anybody ever tell you that Jesus did not claim to be God, because that is clearly what he is claiming here. Literally it is, "Before Abraham came into being, I existed." Jesus uses two distinct verbs that are very different forms of the verb "to be": "Abraham 'became,' but I was already there," he declares. He does not even say, "Before Abraham was, I was," for that would justify what the cults say; that he is only a higher created being. Rather, he uses the name that is used throughout the Old Testament to describe the ultimate character of God. When Moses was sent down to Egypt to stand before Pharaoh, he knew that he had to have authority for what he said. "Whom shall I say has sent me?" he inquired of God. God's reply was, "Tell him I AM WHO I AM has sent you." This is the name that Jesus takes to himself here. It cannot be interpreted in any other way than as a unique claim to deity.

The striking thing is that Jesus is forcing this issue upon these men. He does not placate them; he does not try to compromise with them or calm them down. In fact, he enrages them deliberately, again and again, claiming things that they cannot accept and which only make them more angry and determined to get rid of him. He does not temper his language. On the contrary, he hits harder and harder each time, each claim more staggering than the one preceding it. He drove them to action, he forced a decision until, threatened and angry and filled with rage, they stooped down and took up stones -- in all probability stones lying there for the construction of

the temple -- and they attempted to stone him.

Notice what Jesus did next. Hollywood would enact this scene by having Jesus leap into the sky like Superman and suddenly disappear into the heavens; or grab a sword and cut them to pieces, like Captain Zorro; or simply vanish, like the Invisible Man; or zap them with rockets, like Luke Skywalker. But Jesus does none of these things. According to the text, he "hid himself." He merely stepped down off a slightly raised platform and disappeared into the crowd and was lost to sight. Once again, as we have seen all through this section, the invisible hand of God is at work, protecting him until his time has come.

This is one of the most encouraging things about our Lord in his earthly life. How confident he is that men cannot lay a finger on him until his time had come. It gives him courage, it makes him brave to say what he needs to say because he knows they cannot touch him until the hour comes. It does not mean, of course, that there is not coming a time when they can destroy him. He will be delivered into their hands. He knows that.

We can take great encouragement from this. When we are walking in the Lord's will, saying what he wants us to say and living as he wants us to live, we too are supported by an invisible hand. We have an invisible shield about us, a ministry of angels on our behalf, and until God's hour strikes, nothing can get through that shield; nothing can touch us. If something does get through, it is because God's hour has struck. He is using that for his purpose, and we can accept it on that basis. This is the way Jesus lived, and this is the way he invites us to live in this twentieth century hour as well.

As we come to the close of this remarkable section we have to ask ourselves, "What shall we make of this Man? Who are we, in relationship to him?"

A. W. Tozer, that rugged old prophet from Chicago, once drew a comparison between the way Christians treat Jesus and the way the British treat their monarch. The kings and queens of Britain, he wrote, are called the rulers of the nation. But they do not rule, they only reign. They do not have any power; they are mere figureheads before whom people bow and address as "Your Majesty." But they do not allow these monarchs to have any practical power in their lives.

I am afraid there is truth to that comparison. This is the way we often think of Jesus and treat him in our lives. But he does not appear in that form in Scripture. He is to be our Master, Lord of all our life -- our business life, our sexual life, our recreational life, our family life -- all of it is to come under his Lordship. When we acknowledge him King of our life, he is not to be a mere figurehead, but is One who has the right to rule, the right to control all of our affairs.

When we see him as this section sets him forth, claiming to be the One who honors the Father by the way he lives, the One who removes the sting of death from those who follow him, the One who is the Intimate of God and the Object of all his plans and purposes for all ages of time, and finally, the One who is himself above time as the Eternal One, breaking into time whenever he chooses, there is only one choice to make: Either we worship him or we ignore him; which, in effect, is to stone him, as these men did. I am sure that most hearts here this morning feel like bowing in worship before the splendor and majesty of Lord like this.

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace.

Prayer:

Receive from us, Lord Jesus, the glory and honor due unto your name. As the One who loved us and washed us from our sins in your own blood, the One who has taken our place, paid the price, set us free from our hang-ups, delivered us from the fear of death, brought us out of death into life. Lord, we thank you for that. We pray that we may, by the Spirit, express our thanks in such urgency and fervency that your own heart is blessed and pleased at the worship of your people. In your name we pray, Amen.

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