

A study of John 8 by Dr. Marvin J. Effa.

No More Darkness

“Jesus Has a Demon,” or so say the Pharisees. Rather than accept Jesus’ confirmed teachings, the Pharisees and Jews dismiss the divine Person as a demonized Samaritan (v. 48).

John 8 serves as a vital contribution to John’s evangelistic Gospel. As stated in 20:31¹, John’s purpose is to provide a basis for believing in Jesus for the gift of everlasting life. John 8 is a vivid study in contrasts between the results of believing and not believing.

The chapter presents interpretational difficulty because John records rapid exchanges without always identifying the person speaking. The problem verse is 8:33² where the subject “they” appears to refer to those who “believed in Him.” The ones speaking in 8:33 are arguing with Jesus, and therefore this passage is used to prove that simply believing in Jesus is inadequate to enter God’s family. Some would even argue that these who have believed in verse 30 are, indeed, still of their father, the devil (v. 44). The key interpretational issue is the simple “they” of verse 33. The following authors represent the majority position:

33. *They answered ...] i.e. the Jews who believed Him* who have just been characterized.³

8:31-38, The Jews Who Have Believed. There follows a discussion with Jews who have believed in him (v. 31) that quickly becomes acrimonious, as

¹John 20:31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

²John 8:33 They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How *can* You say, ‘You will be made free’?”

³*The Gospel According to St. John Introduction and Notes on the Authorized Version, Greek Text and "Revised Version" on Opposite Pages.*; Edited by Arthur Westcott., ed. Brooke Foss Westcott and Arthur Westcott (London: J. Murray, 1908), 134.

these believers fall into sharp dispute with Jesus, who soon imputes to them the intention to kill him (v. 37).⁴

The Jews who have believed in Jesus do not respond as true disciples.⁵

“We say we believe, but are those just empty words? It seems the Jewish believers Jesus is addressing in this Scripture believe with their lips but not their heart.”⁶

A better interpretation of the “they” of verse 33, and one that is consistent with John’s theology, is to see the “they” as referring to a group named previously in the chapter.

There are a number of persons or groups referred to in John 8: people Christ taught (v. 2), scribes and Pharisees who brought the woman (v. 3), the woman caught in adultery (v. 4), some Pharisees who were among the people He taught (v. 13), the Jews—a reference to those Jesus taught, including the Pharisees (v. 22), believers (v. 30), and disciples (v. 31). The Pharisees who brought the woman leave and are not mentioned again. A second group of Pharisees are named in verse 13, referred to in verse 19, and included in the group called “the Jews” in verse 22. John consistently uses “they” to refer to this group of Pharisees and Jews. The initial objections to Christ’s teachings may have come from this second group of Pharisees, but after two exchanges the text seems to indicate that the whole group of Jews participated in the escalating verbal battle with Jesus. From among this crowd there were those who believed in Jesus (v. 30); to these Jesus provided additional information regarding discipleship and the freedom it provides. This explanation to these new believers is immediately met with opposition from the Jews. John 8 vividly demonstrates the anger, frustration, willful ignorance, and blind

⁴James Luther Mays, Publishers Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), Jn 8:31.

⁵Rodney A. Whitacre, vol. 4, *John*, The IVP New Testament commentary series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 220.

⁶Peter Loughman, Sermon to adults, age 31-39, *Beyond Belief (John 8:31-47)*, November 11, 2006; available on the internet.

unbelief of the ruling religious leaders and their power over the people; yet in spite of the opposition, there are those who believe in Jesus and receive the gift of everlasting life.

What follows is a brief survey of the ten exchanges provided in John 8.

The first exchange (8:1-11)⁷ interrupts Christ's teaching with accusations regarding an immoral woman. Having been dragged straight from her adulterous bed, she now stands awkwardly as the center of unwanted attention. There is no record of her objection to the scribes' and Pharisees' unjust treatment (they let the man go); they have their own agenda to establish a basis for condemning Jesus (v. 6), so they justify their harsh, immoral, and voyeuristic behavior. Jesus resolves the interruption without answering their antagonistic query regarding Moses' law (v. 5), and allows the woman to retreat with a new-found respect for the Messiah. The scribes, Pharisees, and the woman have now left the temple treasury (v. 20).

The "them" of verse 12⁸ refers to the people He had already been teaching (v. 2). In verse 12, Jesus provides His second "I am" statement: "I am the light of the world." Those who obey Jesus experience freedom from sin's power; they walk in light, not darkness. The Pharisees, who were part of the original crowd named in verse 2, speak up.

⁷ John 8:1-11 ¹But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. ³ Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, ⁴they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. ⁵ Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" ⁶This they said, testing Him, that they might have *something* of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with *His* finger, as though He did not hear. ⁷So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." ⁸And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹Then those who heard *it*, being convicted by *their* conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest *even* to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. ¹⁰When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

⁸ John 8:12 ¹²Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

These Pharisees are the glue that holds the narrative of John 8 together. They incite the crowd of Jews to join the dispute, and the chapter's pattern becomes a statement by Jesus and an objection from the Jews. Verses 19, 22, 25, 27, 33, 39, 41, 48, 52, and 57 all refer back to the Jews and Pharisees of verses 13 and 22.

The **first exchange** regarding the woman taken in adultery becomes the springboard for Jesus' "I am" statement of verse 12; each of the subsequent exchanges expands the "I am" statement. Verse 12 stands as the center of the chapter: an event leads up to it, and all of the discussions flow from it. If the woman taken in adultery believes and follows Jesus, she will leave a life of darkness and experience life to its fullest. This message is reiterated for all believers in verses 30-32 and again in verse 51.

The **second exchange** establishes that Jesus needs only His own word to set forth truth (8:13-18)⁹ and comes in the form of an objection by the Pharisees to Christ's "I am" statement. Such a statement should not be accepted without corroborating testimony (v. 13). Jesus declares that the rules for validating testimony do not apply to Him (v. 14) because He comes from the Father in heaven and returns back to Him. If they want two witnesses, they must accept Jesus' witness as well as His Father's (v. 18).

In the **third exchange** (8:19-21)¹⁰ the Pharisees object to Jesus' claim of His Father's support; "Where is your Father?" they ask. Jesus teaches that one can only know

⁹ John 8:13-18 ¹³ The Pharisees therefore said to Him, "You bear witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true." ¹⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. ¹⁶ And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I *am* with the Father who sent Me. ¹⁷ It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. ¹⁸ I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me."

¹⁰ John 8:19-21 ¹⁹ Then they said to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither Me nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also." ²⁰ These words Jesus spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one laid hands on Him, for His hour had not yet

His Father through knowing Him. Since they reject Him, they will die unregenerate and not go to His destination, namely heaven. In this third exchange Jesus teaches that one can lose his/her sin, know the Father, and go to the Father by knowing Jesus.

The **fourth exchange** (8:22-24)¹¹ shows that the Jews did not understand why they could not go where He was going; they thought He was suicidal. Jesus restated the previous idea regarding His heavenly origin. If they do not believe that He is God (I am), then their sins would remain. The fourth exchange teaches that Jesus, as God, removes the sins of those who believe in Him.

The **fifth exchange** (8:25-26)¹² identifies the speakers as “they” (referring to “the Jews” of verse 22) and lists their question of “Who are You?” (v. 25). Their question comes in response to His assertion of deity in verse 24. Jesus’ response to the question is that He has been telling them all along who He was. While speaking the truth to the world about the One Who sent Him, namely His Father, He adds that He will judge them. The Jews did not understand His reference to the Father, so Jesus continues to speak.

Verses 28 and 29¹³ refer to Christ’s crucifixion. When they crucify Him, His deity will be revealed. The Son and Father are always together and the Son does only that which pleases the Father.

come. ²¹Then Jesus said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin. Where I go you cannot come.”

¹¹ John 8:22-24 ²² So the Jews said, “Will He kill Himself, because He says, ‘Where I go you cannot come?’” ²³ And He said to them, “You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴ Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins.”

¹² John 8:25-26 ²⁵ Then they said to Him, “Who are You?” And Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been saying 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 heard from Him.”

¹³ John 8:27-32 ²⁷ They did not understand that He spoke to them of the Father. ²⁸ Then Jesus said to them, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and *that* I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. ²⁹ And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not

As Christ explains His coming crucifixion, His relationship to the Father, and His deity, many believe in Him (v. 30). To “believe in Jesus” is John’s standard expression to describe what one does to receive the gift of everlasting life. In the next verse Jesus speaks to these new believers. Verse 31 lacks the characteristic preposition εἰς, but it would be a mistake to think that this somehow indicates that they did not receive everlasting life. No one questions the regeneration of the man born blind in John 9:38; yet there the preposition is lacking as well; other salvation passages where John uses the word “believe” without the preposition are 4:40-41, 53, and 19:35. Having believed in Jesus, the believers are told the benefit of abiding in Christ’s word. Abiding in Christ’s word is the condition for being His disciple in the fullest sense of that term (the significance of “indeed” or “truly”). They will know the truth because they abide in His word; this truth will give the abiding disciples liberty (vs. 31-32).

The **sixth exchange** (8:33-38)¹⁴ has the Jews asserting that they have always been free and therefore do not need Jesus or His word to give them freedom. In His answer Jesus asserts that they are slaves to sin and cannot remain rulers in the house of God. While this statement has direct application to the Pharisees, it also includes all the unbelieving Jews, especially those present who desire to kill Him. Jesus speaks from His Father; they speak from theirs.

left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him.”³⁰ As He spoke these words, many believed in Him.³¹ Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.³² And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

¹⁴ John 8:33-38 ³³They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How *can* You say, ‘You will be made free?’” ³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.³⁵ And a slave does not abide in the house forever, *but* a son abides forever.³⁶ Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.³⁷ “I know that you are Abraham’s descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.³⁸ I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father.”

The **seventh exchange** (8:39-47)¹⁵ is a two-fold exchange. The first part is in verses 39-41a, and the second in 41b-47. John subordinates their response in verse 41b by using a different word than in the other parts of John 8. The translations recognize this change by not setting the Jews' response as a separate verse as is done throughout John 8. The Jews declare Abraham to be their father. Jesus argues that their murderous works prove Abraham is not their father. They call Jesus illegitimate and go a step higher on the "father ladder" and claim God as their father (v. 41). Christ's answer is flat denial. They cannot hate him and love God. Their father, the devil, is a murderer and a liar. They have nothing to do with God, His Son, and God's word; they are not of God (v. 47).

In the **eighth exchange** (8:48-51)¹⁶ the Jews proclaim that Jesus is an accursed Samaritan, and more than that, it is He, not them, who has a demon. Christ rejects this dishonoring assertion, warns them of judgment, and promises that all who keep His word will not see death. This phrase "will not see death" will be considered in the following paragraph.

¹⁵ John 8:39-47 ³⁹ They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. ⁴¹You do the deeds of your father." Then they said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God." ⁴²Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. ⁴³Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. ⁴⁴You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *resources*, for he is a liar and the father of it. ⁴⁵But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. ⁴⁶Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? ⁴⁷He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God."

¹⁶John 8:48-51 ⁴⁸Then the Jews answered and said to Him, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" ⁴⁹Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. ⁵⁰And I do not seek My *own* glory; there is One who seeks and judges. ⁵¹Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death."

Verses 51 and 52 are used to support the idea that the gift of everlasting life is obtained through an obedient life. B.W. Johnson's comments are representative of the majority of commentators:

51. If a man keep my word, he shall never see death. Here again is a condition and a promise. Notice 1. Its universal character. *If any one*, Jew or Gentile, male or female, bond or free. 2. The condition: *Keep my words*. Again, obedience essential; no life without it; by obedience we are not only freed, but enter into life. 3. *Shall not see death*. Death of the body is not reckoned death, but merely the gate through which the believer enters upon a more perfect life.¹⁷

It seems that Jesus' statement "never see death," and the Jews' statement "never taste death" are parallel. Adding emphasis to His statement, Jesus adds "most assuredly" and a double negative with the aorist subjunctive (one of the strongest ways in Greek to express a prohibition). One does not receive much help from the New Testament in interpreting "never see death," but the margin of Psalm 89:48 (What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave?) suggests "experience" as an alternate to "see." Previously He had taught that abiding in His truthful word would be the disciples' path to freedom (vs. 31-32); now He promises freedom from death to the believer who keeps His word. For the unbeliever, physical death is the devastating beginning of judgment. Separation from God, everlasting confinement in the Lake of Fire, and degrees of punishment based on works is the lot for the unbeliever. For the believer who keeps, watches over, or guards Christ's word, there is the promise of not experiencing the devastating consequences of death. Believers gain entrance into heaven by believing in Jesus; at the Judgment Seat of Christ, their works are judged. A believer who does not keep Christ's word is saved as through fire (1 Corinthians 3:15), but he/she

¹⁷B.W. Johnson, *John : The New Testament Commentary, Vol. III* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999), 146.

experiences loss and therefore has not fully escaped the consequences of Adam's sin. By keeping Christ's word, believers fully escape the consequences of death. Rather than death, he/she enjoys the richest life possible both now and in the age to come. This is in keeping with Jesus' statement in John 10:10, where He distinguishes between having life and having life more abundantly. The gift of everlasting life comes by believing in Jesus; an abundant entrance into His Messianic kingdom is a reward for the believer who keeps Christ's word. Escaping the full consequences of God's wrath requires justification by faith and sanctification by the Spirit (Romans 8:1).¹⁸

The above explanation answers issues pertaining to life after death, but it seems that Jesus also intends His promise to address one's physical death as well. In one sense, physical death is a mystery and cannot be understood by watching others die; it is something that must be experienced personally. Yet the promise of Scripture is that God's children have been released from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15). The New Testament's customary way of referring to the believer's death is "sleep." The testimony of believers' last words provides experiential evidence that the physical death of a believer who keeps Christ's word is measurably different than unbelievers.¹⁹ On a personal level, the author, who served both as a hospital and police chaplain for many years, adds his agreement: there is difference between the death of believers and unbelievers. A new word—sleeps—is required to describe a believer's physical death, lest it be confused with what the unbeliever experiences.

¹⁸ Romans 8:1 *There is* therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. (Majority Text)

¹⁹ Herbert Lockyer, *Last Words of Saints and Sinners: 700 Final quotes from the Famous, the Infamous, and the Inspiring Figures of history*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1969.

The **ninth exchange** (8:52-56)²⁰ comes as a reaction to Jesus' statement "shall not see death." If what Jesus says is true, Abraham, of all people, should not have died. Yet Abraham and the prophets all died, therefore Jesus claims to be greater than the best of their biblical heroes. Their question, "Who do You make Yourself out to be?" drips with incredulity. They are shocked, angered, and offended: "How dare You take such an honor to Yourself!?" Jesus replies that the Father is the One Who has honored Him; to claim anything less would make Jesus a liar like them. Besides, says Jesus, Abraham was delighted to meet Me.

The **tenth and final exchange** (8:57-58)²¹ finds the Jews reminding Jesus of His age. Abraham has been dead for a considerable time, and Jesus does not look a day over 50. He must be wrong in His statements regarding Abraham, and He would be wrong—if He were not God. In verse 58 Jesus takes for Himself one of the two major names for God as He reveals Himself in the Old Testament. Long before Abraham, there was Yahweh, the great "I AM" of absolute eternal existence. Fully recognizing the claim made by Jesus, the Jews took up stones to execute this blasphemer, but He hid Himself and then went out by passing through their midst.

These ten exchanges of John 8 demonstrate the official rejection of Jesus by both the Pharisees and the Jews. Attributing His teaching to an indwelling demon, they do

²⁰ John 8:52-56 ⁵²Then the Jews said to Him, "Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and You say, 'If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death.' ⁵³Are 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 you say that He is your God. ⁵⁵Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, 'I do not know Him,' I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. ⁵⁶Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad."

²¹John 8:57-59 ⁵⁷Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" ⁵⁸Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." ⁵⁹Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

their best to murder Him. Jesus Christ declares openly that He is the light of the world. All who believe in Him and abide in His word will richly experience life. They will not die in their sins nor be condemned by the Son's judgment. They will experience maximum freedom, never see death, and abide in God's house forever. Hearing Jesus talk about Himself, some believe in Him and receive the gift of everlasting life. The majority simply hear words that provide additional reasons to disbelieve. Feeling anger, murder, and rage, they seek to murder this gracious One, who delivers a woman thrown before Him. John presents his readers with a choice: follow the religious leaders and the crowd and remain in darkness, or believe in Jesus and follow Him in the light of life. Rather than mistakenly using John 8 to attempt to prove that those who believe in Jesus may, in fact, still be children of the devil, this passage should be used to invite unbelievers to believe in this most amazing Jesus Who will, if they abide in His word, free them from death.