



In Christ we have the Presence of the future.

Lesson 8

The Great "I AM"

Lesson Setting

Scripture: John 7:1-8:59.

In this section Jesus travels to the temple in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. While there He engages in a series of debates with the crowd and particularly with the Jewish leaders. While this lesson briefly covers the events described in John 7 and 8, the particular focus of this lesson is on the "I AM" statements found in this section and throughout the Gospel. So this lesson is more thematic than textual in approach.

What did I do to deserve this? wondered Moses as he sat on a rock, surrounded by sheep and the desolate landscape around Mount Sinai. *My life is an endless pattern of unfulfilled potential. A failure without a future, that's me.*

Moses recalled how he had spent his childhood in a slave hut back in Egypt, gradually coming to understand that he had been adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh and would one day be the ruler of all Egypt. At the age of twelve, he moved from the slave hut to the king's palace. There he experienced the finest teachers and the greatest possessions the world had to offer. As he grew older, he was given increasing responsibility in the court. He commanded larger and larger units in the Egyptian army. He was on a fast track to success, power, wealth,

fame, and ultimately a revered place of burial in the Valley of the Kings as a new member of the Egyptian pantheon of gods.

But at the very height of his power and success, he remembered the teachings of his birth mother once more. He remembered that he was not really an Egyptian. He was a child of God, a Hebrew, and his real heritage was in the slave huts down in the Nile delta. With one rash act, he threw away his earthly future and identified with an oppressed and helpless people.

And where had it gotten him? Instead of helping them, he himself had lost everything. He had gone from sleeping in a king's palace to sleeping under the stars on stony ground. He had gone from sumptuous banquet tables to scrounging around for whatever one could find in the desert. He had gone from fame to obscurity. He had gone from commanding an army of the fittest and best-trained men in the world to com-

Describe a time when you met a person who was truly powerful, famous, or awesome in personality. How did you feel and react?

manding a flock of stupid, aimless sheep.

Now he was eighty years old. His life and his opportunities all seemed in the past. The Hebrew people in Egypt were just as much slaves as they had been on the day of his birth. He had accomplished absolutely nothing with his life! With all his mistakes, God must have forsaken him. He remembered the song he had written to God only a few weeks before:

You sweep men away in the sleep of death;
they are like the new grass of the morning—
though in the morning it springs up new,
by evening it is dry and withered.

We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.
You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.

All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan.
The length of our days is seventy years—
or eighty, if we have the strength;
yet their span is but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

Who knows the power of your anger?
For your wrath is as great as the fear
that is due you.
Teach us to number our days aright,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom
(Psalm 90:5-12).

O well, thought Moses, I guess things are about over for me. If God is going to free those Hebrews, He'll have to use someone else.

Just then Moses noticed a strange thing. A bush over on the mountain was burning. This happened from time to time in the tinder-dry desert of Sinai. But this bush just kept on burning. It didn't burn up! He went over to take a closer look. Suddenly, in the middle of nowhere, he heard a voice calling, "Moses! Moses!"

"I'm right here."

"Take off your shoes, Moses. You're standing on holy ground. I am the God of your fathers."

Moses was terrified and turned his face away from God.

God continued, "I have seen the misery and the oppression My people face every day in Egypt, and I have decided to rescue them and bring them to their own land. So I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people out of Egypt."

"Who, me? Why me? Why now? I am nobody and going nowhere. I am too old, and I don't talk very well. Please send somebody else."

"Don't worry, I will be with you. You can do it," God replied.

"But when I get there, who should I tell them sent me?"

"I AM WHO I AM," God replied. . . .

Journaling (Experience)

To what degree am I concerned about death? To what degree have I gained peace in the knowledge that Jesus is Lord over death?

The Feast of Tabernacles

In John 7:10 Jesus participates in the Feast of Tabernacles at the temple in Jerusalem. His presence at the feast draws Him into repeated confrontations with the religious leadership. These confrontations are recorded in the Gospel of John because they offered the opportunity for Jesus to clarify His mission.

In Palestine there are two basic seasons of the year, an extremely dry summer of four to five months (during which it rarely rains) and a rainy season of equal length spanning the winter. The Feast of Tabernacles comes at that time of year when the summer drought is usually ending (September/October). The winter grains are planted, and the harvest of fruit is celebrated.

The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated the Exodus and the time of Israel's wandering in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:43), when God provided Israel with water and light (Exodus 13:21, 22; 17:1-7). So two major themes of the feast were water (a water ceremony was a major feature of each day's festivities) and light (torchlight processions were held at night). People lived outside in booths made from palm branches, reminding them of God's watchcare in the wilderness. This reminder of the Exodus taught them that just as God provided water and food to Israel in the wilderness, so He can continue to provide

for the needs of the present.

Bible Search

Jesus as the Great "I AM"

Read John 7 and 8 in light of the following summary:

In John 7 Jesus first debates with His brothers about the timing of His visit to Jerusalem (verses 1-9). Then He debates with the Jewish leadership about the validity of

His teachings (10-19), His healing at Bethesda on the Sabbath (20-24), and where He came from (25-36). After the Jewish leaders fail to capture Him (40-52) or embarrass Him (7:53-8:11), chapter 8 continues the debates in the temple courts. The issues of the validity of Jesus' teachings and of His origin (8:12-30) are taken up

again. The debate then degenerates into name-calling (31-59). Jesus and His opponents accuse each other of being children of the devil and debate what it means to be called children of Abraham. This section concludes with the dramatic statement of Jesus, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" (8:58).

This concluding assertion points to one of the major features of John 7 and 8, the presence of a number of special "I AM" statements (signaled by the unusual Greek expression *ego eimi*—pronounced "aygo aymee") on the part of Jesus.

**Just as God provided
water and food to
Israel in the wilderness,
so He can continue to
provide for the needs
of the present.**

Answer the following questions regarding the "I AM" statements of chapter 8:

1. To what does Jesus compare Himself in John 8:12?

Jesus may have had the sun in mind when He used this expression.

2. How important does Jesus consider this "I AM" concept?

The words "the one I claim to be" are supplied by the translators; the original simply says "I AM."

3. What event will convince the people that "I AM"?

Again, the words "the one I claim to be" are supplied by the translators.

4. When Jesus calls Himself "I AM" in 8:58, what is He claiming?

What is clear from John 8 alone is that the "I AM" statements are of vital importance, that they are associated somehow with the Cross of Jesus, and that they indicate that Jesus was in existence long before He came to this earth as a human being. But before we can fully grasp the meaning of the "I AM" statements in John 8, we need to survey their use throughout the Gospel.



Bible Search

The "I AM" Texts in the Gospel of John

This Bible Search illustrates the three types of "I AM" usages that Jesus makes in the Gospel of John.

Answer the following questions on the basis of the texts provided:

5. In what two settings does Jesus use the phrase "I AM" in a purely human and ordinary way (something like, "Hey,

guys, it's me!")? John 4:26; 6:20.

6. Jesus uses the special "I AM" phrase with seven different predicates in the Gospel of John. "I AM the . . ." List the seven predicates. John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25, 26; 14:6; 15:1.

These statements illustrate ways in which Jesus' divinity is exercised for the benefit of those who are in relationship with Him.

7. How will the disciples come to believe that Jesus is the "I AM"? John 13:18, 19.

In John 13:19 the word *He* in "I am He" is supplied by the translators.

Jesus sometimes uses "I AM" all by itself (called by scholars of John the "absolute use") to assert His full equality with the God described in the Old Testament.



Journaling

(Insight)

How has my study of the Gospel of John thus far increased my awareness of the greatness of Jesus?



Bible Search

"I AM" in the Old Testament

While one can learn a great deal from a study of the "I AM" statements in the Gospel of John itself, greater clarity arises when these statements are seen in the light of the way they were used by God in Old Testament times.

Answer the following questions on the basis of the texts provided:

8. To what question of Moses does God answer, "I AM WHO I AM," in Exodus 3:14?

9. What does the "I AM" express in Isaiah 43:10, 11?

10. What other characteristic of the "I AM God" is expressed in Isaiah 46:9, 10?

Within the Old Testament, "I AM" functioned as a name for God, expressing His continual availability to meet human needs, His total uniqueness among all claimants to the title of "god," and His ability to foretell the future accurately.

11. What action will convince people that "I am the Lord"? Ezekiel 34:27, 30, 31.

12. What is the predominant tense in Ezekiel 34:20-31—past, present, or future?

13. What role will God Himself play at that time? Ezekiel 34:20-24.

14. What action shows even the nations that "I am the Lord"? Ezekiel 36:23, 24.

15. What is the predominant tense in Ezekiel 36:22-38—past, present, or future?

In the writings of prophets like Ezekiel, the "I AM" expression is used in the context of the mighty works of future salvation that the Lord will accomplish in the age to come. The Old Testament comes to a climax looking forward to some future time when God will do a mighty work for His people and so be recognized for who He is. The God who will act at that time is the same unique and all-knowing God who met Moses at the burning bush.

The Presence of the Future

The most exciting thing about the "I AM" usages in the Gospel of John comes into focus when we see how Jesus was building

on the Old Testament picture. From the Old Testament perspective, God would act as a Good Shepherd to feed and care for His people at the great end-time climax of earth's history. But Jesus declares that the future salvation that was promised in the prophets has become a present reality in Him. He is the Good Shepherd that was promised in Ezekiel 34 (John 10:11). He is the divine figure (John 8:24, 28, 58) who knows the future ahead of time (Isaiah 46:9, 10; John 13:19). What was future in the Old Testament is made present in Christ.

What was future in the Old Testament is made present in Christ.

In Jesus' "I AM" statements, we see an assertion of His divinity. He is the God of the Old Testament, come down to shepherd His people just as He promised through the prophets (John 8:58). Jesus is none other than the Yahweh of the Old Testament. He is fully and truly God in the highest sense, even while walking on earth clothed in human flesh. He has preexisted throughout eternity (John 8:58). Belief in the divinity of Jesus is essential for salvation (John 8:24).

But there is more. In these "I AM" statements is the assertion that the future has become present in Christ. He can deliver the promised glories of the Old Testament future kingdom to those who believe in Him now. To be in relationship with Jesus is to have the abundance of the future kingdom *now*.

by faith. In a real sense, we are already living in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). There is nothing out of reach to those in relationship with Jesus. In Christ there are limitless possibilities. The mighty

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things that Jesus (God) did in Old Testament times are brought to earth by Him, and, through Him, by the Holy Spirit.

Journaling (Prayer)

Lord, make the heavenly realities of Your kingdom real in my life.

The Truth Sets You Free

We would be remiss if we passed by John 8 and did not reflect for a moment on the awesome comment of Jesus, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). In the Feast of Tabernacles the two great symbols were water and light. Both of these represent truth, the truth about the person of Jesus ("Come to me and drink," "I am the Light of the world" [John 7:37; 8:12]) and His revelation of the will and character of God (John 3:33, 34; 14:6). For the second generation of Christians, the Jesus focus of the New Testament makes it the greatest revelation of God and of truth

that is available anywhere.

Freedom is one of the greatest needs of human beings. How and in what way does the truth about Jesus set people free?

1. The truth brings freedom from fear. The disciple of Jesus never walks alone, no matter where he or she may go; and in the presence of Jesus, fear is gone, because "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). You can walk with confidence when you go on God's errands.
2. The truth brings freedom from self. For most people, the greatest handicap to a fulfilled life is found within themselves. Jesus has the power to change what we cannot change. God takes us beyond where we would naturally be without Him. In Christ, all things become new (2 Corinthians 5:17; Revelation 21:5).
3. The truth also brings freedom from being overly influenced by other people. Many people are paralyzed by fear of what other people may think of them. To know that we are acceptable to God reduces the impact of what other people think or say. We can think and act in terms of what is best rather than being crippled by whether or not others will be pleased with us.
4. The truth brings freedom from sin. Many people have experienced the addictive power of sin. They sin, not because they want to, but because they have to. Sinners don't do what they like; they do what sin likes. Dis-

cipleship with Jesus breaks the chains of sin and empowers people to reach their full potential. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Journaling (Insight)

What difference does this concept of freedom in the gospel make in my life?

Journaling (Experience)

To what degree have I experienced the four types of freedom that are available in the gospel? In what circumstances do I find

myself concerned about what other people think? In what areas of my life have I experienced the addictive power of sin? What kinds of fears have I experienced in my life recently?

Journaling (Prayer)

Lord, help me be willing to allow you to bring your freedom into my life in . . .

Anchor Text

" 'I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am!' " (John 8:58).