

# Say What?

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Hard Sayings of Christ:  
I Am- John 8:58

## Feast of Tabernacles

Jesus' interactions in John 7 and 8 take place during the Feast of Tabernacles. Tabernacles was celebrated from 15 to 21 Tishri, which fell in September or October, after the grape harvest and two months prior to Dedication (Lev. 23:33-43; Num. 29:12-39; Neh. 8:13-18). The feast followed shortly after the Day of Atonement and marked the conclusion of the annual cycle of religious festivals that began with Passover and Unleavened Bread six months earlier. Originally a harvest festival, Tabernacles (or Booths) recalled God's provision for his people during the wilderness wanderings. Festivities lasted seven days, culminating in an eighth day of special celebration and festive assembly. Owing to the daily solemn outpouring of water during the festival (Num. 28:7), Tabernacles came to be associated with eternal hope (Zech. 14:16-19). Immensely popular, it was simply called "the Feast" by the Jews. Josephus called it "the greatest and holiest feast of the Jews" (Andreas J. Kostenberger, "John" in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Baker, 452).

During the Feast of Tabernacles Jewish pilgrims from throughout the Roman and Parthian world would gather in Jerusalem. The men would live in booths constructed on rooftops or elsewhere, commemorating God's faithfulness to his people when they lived in booths in the wilderness (women and children were not required to live in the booths). This feast was known for its joyous celebration. The festival is still observed by Jews today. Booths are set up on or around people's homes and friends are invited over to share meals in the booths. People are also supposed to take time to reflect on their dependence on God and his provision for their life (Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, IVP, 281).



Digging  
Deeper

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*"I tell you the truth," Jesus  
answered, "before  
Abraham was born, I am!"  
John 8:58*

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available for download at  
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### **Jesus' Confrontation with the Crowd**

The mention of freedom offends Jesus' Jewish audience with its implication that they are not already free. As Abraham's descendants, they are proud of having never been anybody's slaves (8:33). Jesus explains that he is using slavery as a metaphor for sin and death (8:34-36).

Descendants of Abraham or not, they are subject to death like everyone else and, in that sense, slaves. Jesus' promise to set them free is a promise of life, an alternative to the grim prospect of dying in their sins. If the crowd is willing to trust in him, they will never die (8:51).

Two themes- the interplay of life and death, and the significance of being descended from Abraham- are the issues that will drive Jesus and the Jewish "believers" further and further apart and trigger the confrontation with which the Temple discourse comes to an end (8:59). The descent of these "believers" (who are not true believers since they try and kill Jesus at the end of the chapter!) from Abraham is not in question (8:37), but their conduct belies their heritage. Physically they are Abraham's descendants, Jesus admits, but neither ethically nor spiritually are they Abraham's children (J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, Harper & Row, 138-139).

### **Jesus' Claim to Be God**

Jesus tells the crowd that Abraham rejoiced when he saw the coming of Jesus in the future (8:56). The apparent reference is to the promise Abraham received that from his offspring blessing would come to the whole world (Gen. 12:1-3). The promise is assumed to be fulfilled in Jesus (see Gal. 3:16), but the beginning of its realization is the birth of Isaac and his deliverance from premature death (Gen. 18, 22). It is probably in connection with one or both of these events that Abraham is understood to have seen Jesus' day. The narrator may even have in mind the specific moment when "Abraham looked around and saw a ram caught in a bush by its horns" and knew that his son was spared (Gen. 22:13); this incident was regarded by some early Christian interpreters as pointing to the death of Jesus the Lamb of God (Michaels, 140).

The claim in 8:58, "Before Abraham came into being, I am," contrasts an allusion to Abraham's birth with a reference to Jesus' eternal existence, focused on his incarnation. Jesus' language here echoes God's self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Thus Jesus claims not merely preexistence- in that case, he could have said, "before Abraham was born, I was" - but deity. The use of "I am" startlingly culminates earlier occurrences of this expression in this chapter (see 8:24, 28).

Upon hearing Jesus say this, they took up stones to throw at him. Stoning was the prescribed punishment for blasphemy (Lev. 24:16). And the reaction of the crowd shows that this is indeed what they believe Jesus was claiming for himself. But this near stoning was not the result of righteous judgment, but mob violence (Kostenberger, 459).

The "I am" name for God is found a number of times in Isaiah 40-55, where God uses it to proclaim his uniqueness as Israel's covenant Lord, faithful to his promises and strong to deliver and restore his people (Isa. 41:4; 43:10-13, 25; 45:18-19; 48:12; 52:6). Its use implies a radical and unqualified monotheism: "Besides me there is no other god, there never was and never will be" (Isa. 43:10b); "there is no other god" (Isa. 45:18); "no other god is real" (Deut. 32:39). For anyone else to use this formula in the same way was blasphemy (Isa. 47:8; Zeph. 2:15). Here for the first time, the implications of Jesus' use of this formula came through to his hearers; in reaction they try to stone him (8:59). There is no doubt that they understood Jesus to be speaking with the voice of God, as if he himself were "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (see Exodus 3:6) (Michaels, 141).

To our way of thinking, it's hard to understand how Jesus' words promoted such a violent response. Jesus' use of "I am" meant that he was applying to himself the divine name by which God had revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses had asked, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM...Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14). That is the name that Jesus took to himself. Because of that, the Jews, who immediately recognized his claim for what it was, reached out to kill him (James Montgomery Boice, *God the Redeemer*, IVP, 131).

In a number of statements Jesus uses the phrase "I am" (John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5-6). By itself this may be nothing more than a self-identification. But the phrase is used in the Old Testament by God to identify himself as God, and some of the usages in John seem to require that Jesus is echoing this way of speaking and thereby speaking in the place of God (John 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5-6). Statements about his coming down from heaven (John 3:13, 31-32) and having seen the Father (John 6:46) similarly testify to his existence before coming into this world and to a knowledge of the Father gained before he came into the world.

There is less stress on the fact that the person of whom all this is said is at the same time a human being. Even so, John contains one of the clearest New Testament statements of incarnation: the Word became "flesh", that is, human (John 1:14). To some interpreters Jesus has seemed to be simply a divine, heavenly figure in human guise, like a Greek god or goddess metamorphosing into a human form in outward appearance but not really becoming a human being. Yet, for John this is manifestly not the case with Jesus, who has human experiences, including death (I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*, IVP, 516).

John shows us that Jesus has a unique relationship to God. The intimate nature of his relationship with God has important implications for Jesus' status and nature. His relationship with the God reveals that he is the true Son of God, being God himself. But most easy to observe, the primary word for God used in John's gospel is Father. Specifically, this phrase is used to express the relationship between God and Jesus. This usage almost comes exclusively on the lips of Jesus, who speaks of "the Father" and "my Father"; once he speaks to his disciples of "your Father" (John 20:17). In John's thinking, God is only "Father" to Jesus and those who follow Jesus. Those who reject Jesus are unable to call upon God as the Father since they reject his Son (Marshall, 514-515).

### **The Implications of Jesus' Deity**

Jesus claimed to be God. Not just one of the gods or god junior, but the only, eternal God of the universe. There is no way around it. His teaching, his life, his miracles, his death, his resurrection, and the teaching of his followers all point to the fact that Jesus is God. Jesus being God has some pretty important implications. It means that if we want to learn about God then we need to look at Jesus. It also means that what Jesus says is ultimately true for God cannot lie. Jesus tells us that he is the only way to salvation. He also tells us that he is the only way to true joy and life. The only way that we are going to receive any of these things is by putting our trust in Jesus. The implications of Jesus being God also mean that we must follow him. It doesn't matter if his teachings seem counter-intuitive or too demanding. Since Jesus is God he deserves our worship and our obedience. And the fact that Jesus is God also means that we can have all the things he promised to those who would trust in him: joy, love, eternal life, and much more.

### **Home Group Questions**

1. How do you decide if something is true? How does our culture decide if something is true?

2. What makes finding truth difficult?

3. How do we know that Jesus was claiming to be God in John 8:58?

4. Why was the name "I am" important to the Jews (see Exodus 3:13-15)?

5. What other evidences are there in the NT that Jesus is God?

6. If Jesus is God, what kind of attitude should we have toward his teachings?

### **Questions for Personal Application**

7. Do you believe that Jesus is God? If so, are you ready to follow the hard sayings of Jesus? Pray that God would prepare you to hear and obey the teachings of Jesus in the coming weeks.