

"I Am the Light of the World"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

March 8, 2009

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Deuteronomy 16:13-15 (NRSV)

¹³You shall keep the festival of booths for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press. ¹⁴Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns. ¹⁵Seven days you shall keep the festival to the LORD your God at the place that the LORD will choose; for the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate.

John 8:12-20 (NRSV)

¹²Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." ¹³Then the Pharisees said to him, "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." ¹⁴Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵You judge by human standards; I judge no one. ¹⁶Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. ¹⁷In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. ¹⁸I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf." ¹⁹Then they said to him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." ²⁰He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

God is the Life that defeats death; the Goodness that overcomes evil; and the Light that banishes darkness. If we want to know this God fully, we must know Jesus, for he is this God, the light of the world.

The festival of Booths (aka Tabernacles; see the p. 3 textbox and also Leviticus 23:39-43) was a joyous time in ancient Jerusalem. It was part of the Exodus story that the Jews lived out each year in their festivals. Passover festival in the spring was a party to celebrate God's rescue of their enslaved forebears. Booths, an agricultural harvest festival in the fall, was a celebration of God's care of those former slaves in the Sinai wilderness. Families were to live in temporary shelters (hence, "booths") during the seven-day festival, so that they would never forget God's graciousness in the wilderness.

The ancient Jews used light to express the joy of the great festival of Booths. They lit four giant golden lamps in the temple courtyards that were so bright, it was said they lit up the entire city. But that wasn't all. The evening Booths celebrations also creatively incorporated the use of light . . . lots of light.

Why so much light? Because the festival was all about God and God's saving grace, and God is the light that overcomes the darkness. "It is you who lights up my lamp; the LORD, my God, lights up my darkness" (Ps. 18:28); "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear" (Ps. 27:1). God's Law is the light: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). Even God's servant is the light: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness and I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6).

The Light of the World

Beginning in John 7, we find Jesus in Jerusalem for the fall festival of Booths. As a Law-keeping Jew, Jesus would have come to the temple at least three times a year, for each

of the three major festivals. This year's trip to Booths would be more memorable than most. What we find is a man in an ever-growing confrontation with his opponents. Jesus teaches with authority and the crowds wonder where he could have acquired such learning (7:14-24). Whispers and rumors begin to fly around the city; the people begin to wonder why Jesus hasn't been arrested, given what he has said and done. They

The Plot of John's Gospel

We don't often think of the gospels as having plots, but they do. Each gospel is a skillfully written narrative and each has certain themes around which the writer builds the plot. To put it another way, none of the gospels are just a random collection of stories loosely strung together.

Alan Culpepper outlines the plot of John's story in this way.¹

Jesus is the Word incarnate who has been sent by the Father to (1) reveal the Father to the world, (2) to take away the sin of the world, and (3) to authorize believers to become the children of God. Though Jesus is put to death, paradoxically it is through his death that Jesus fulfills his mission.

Here's Culpepper's simple outline of the gospel:

Jesus' origin, Ch. 1
Jesus' public ministry, Ch. 2-12
Jesus' farewell discourse, Ch. 13-17
Jesus' death and resurrection, Ch. 18-21

John's story unfolds through a series of encounters that people have with Jesus. Some of these people are Jews, some are not. Some are men, some are women. Some are crippled or blind, some are not. The question posed to all is simply, "Who is Jesus?" And in every case, the question demands a response. Does the person recognize that Jesus is the eternal Word? Does the person come to believe? Do they trust Jesus? Some do and some do not.

If you read through the daily Bible readings in this study, notice how often the words "testimony" and "testify" appear in the gospel. John contains more than a third of all the occurrences of these words in the Bible. John writes so that we, the readers, "may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing [we] may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

1. "The Plot of John's Story of Jesus," *Interpretation*, October, 1995

ask, "Can it be that the authorities really know this is Messiah?" (7:26). In

response, the temple priests and Pharisees send out officers to arrest Jesus during the festival, though they are unable to do so.

The confrontation continues to grow. The crowds are divided about Jesus, as are even the priests and Pharisees. When Jesus comes upon a crowd beginning to stone a woman for adultery, he confronts them, suggesting that whoever is without sin throw the first stone . . . and the crowd slinks away, one by one.¹

Then, with the seemingly innocent statement, "I am the light of the world," Jesus rocks the crowds again. Just as Jesus claimed to be the true "bread of life," the nourishment needed for eternal life, Jesus now takes upon himself the fulfillment of what the light represents. The Law is the light . . . now, Jesus is the Law. Isaiah's servant of God is the light . . . now, Jesus is that servant. God is the light that banishes the darkness . . . now, Jesus is the incarnation of God.

Anyone with ears to hear would understand the weight of Jesus' words. Indeed, those who would charge him with blasphemy would be right in doing so, unless Jesus is the One whom he is claiming to be.

Who says?

The Pharisees understand Jesus' claim and demand to know why they should believe him. Jesus says this about himself, but where is the second witness wisely demanded by the Law of Moses?

Jesus' first response seems almost non-responsive. He need not produce a witness because he knows from whence he has come (8:14-15). That alone makes

¹This story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery is one of the most familiar, memorable, and arresting stories in the gospels. Yet, the story is not found in the earliest manuscripts of John's gospel. It seems to have been incorporated into the gospel in the third century or so. Nonetheless, it has the ring of authenticity and seems well placed in chapter 8.

Major Jewish Festivals¹

This week's passage from Deuteronomy prescribes the Festival of Tabernacles, aka Feast of Booths. It is one of five Jewish festivals.

The three major Jewish festivals were intimately connected with agriculture (**Passover**, with the barley harvest; **Pentecost**, with wheat harvest and the bringing of first-fruits to the Temple; **Tabernacles (Booths)**, with the grape harvest). They symbolically celebrated the blessing of Israel's God upon his Land and his people, and thereby drew together the two major covenantal themes of Temple and Land. In addition, Passover celebrated the exodus from Egypt; Pentecost, the giving of Torah on Sinai; and, Tabernacles, the wilderness wandering on the way to the promised land. All three, therefore, focused attention on key aspects of Israel's story, and in the retelling of that story encouraged the people once again to think of themselves as the Creator's free people, who would be redeemed by him and so vindicated in the eyes of the world. This theme was amplified in the prayers appointed for the different occasions.

Two other festivals made substantially the same point, though without the agricultural connection. **Hanukkah**, commemorating the overthrow of Antiochus Epiphanes by Judas Maccabeus and his followers, underlined the vital importance of true monotheistic worship and the belief that when the tyrants raged against Israel her God would come to the rescue. **Purim**, celebrating the story found in the book of Esther, re-enacted the reversal of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews in the Persian empire; it drove home the same message.

Together, the five feasts ensured that any Jew who made any attempt to join in (and by all accounts participation was widespread) would emerge from the festivals with the basic Jewish worldview strengthened: one God, Israel as his people, the sacredness of the Land, the inviolability of Torah, and the certainty of redemption.

¹ This material on Jewish festivals was taken and adapted from the study guide to a series by N.T. Wright, *Jesus: The New Way*. The guide was prepared by Denise George and is copyrighted by the Christian History Institute.

his testimony valid. Of course, such an answer wouldn't satisfy the Pharisees. Why should they believe the implied claim he came from above, any more than the claim that he is the light? Then, Jesus tells them he does have another witness who can testify to the truth of Jesus' claims.

The witness is his Father! And, he tells them, because the Pharisees don't know Jesus' Father, they don't know Jesus, nor the truth he brings them. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (8:19). No wonder these leaders of Israel tried to arrest him and would one day succeed.

A journey to the truth and to a cross

Jesus knows that he could hardly be clearer in making plain his identity with the Father, and, hence, with God. It is not surprising then that Jesus follows up his claim to be the Light by foreseeing his own death. He knows full well where this is headed – unless he backs off and turns away from the vocation given him by God.

Jesus begins by making plain what he only implied earlier, he is "from above," while his accusers and the crowds are "from below." They are "of this world." Jesus is not. Further, he says, "I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe I am he" (v. 24). English translations obscure Jesus' intent here by translating *egō eimi* (Greek for "I am"), as "I am he." It would be better translated as "... unless you believe I AM."² It is a clear and unyielding statement of Jesus' identity with God. And the cross upon which he will be lifted will be his exaltation and the definitive revelation, for again in v. 28, Jesus repeats the "I AM."

In these weeks of Lent, Jesus takes us deeper and deeper into the mystery of his true identity. From bread to light to, next week, a gate for the sheep, we are coming to understand that Jesus is the Great I AM, and to embrace the life-changing ramifications of this astounding claim.

²Seven times in John's gospel, Jesus uses *egō eimi*, "I am," without an accompanying noun like "the bread of life." Jesus does so in order to identify himself with God. He and only he is the embodiment of God. Only Jesus does what only God can and would do. Only Jesus speaks with the authority of God.

The Book of Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy is one of the most important Old Testament books. The New Testament writers quote Deuteronomy more than any OT book. A portion of it may be “the book of the law” that King Josiah finds just decades before the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (see 2 Kings 22). Deuteronomy is the final presentation of the Law. The word “Deuteronomy” means “second law.” It repeats some of the law code and even revises it. For example, compare the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 with its restatement in Deuteronomy 5. You’ll see that in Exodus, wives are property which could be coveted. But wives are omitted from the property lists in Deuteronomy.

There are a few things to keep in mind as you read Deuteronomy.

- Though the book contains many laws, it is much more a book of the heart. Look for the spirit of the law, the instruction given by God to Israel. Notice that the book reads much more like a sermon than some sort of legal code.
- There are several ways to outline or organize the book. The authors of the Open Bible see the book as a series of three sermons. What God has done for Israel (1:1 – 4:43), What God expects of Israel (4:44-26:19), and What God will do for Israel (27:1 – 34:12). Many scholars see the book as a covenant that elaborates on the Ten Commandments. (Compare Deuteronomy 5:6-21 with Exodus 20:1-17 and remember that Exodus is set nearly 40 years before Deuteronomy!)
- In its structure and much of its language, Deuteronomy is a treaty/covenant between a king and his people. We can compare the book to a standard ancient near-eastern treaty. They both have preambles, a reminder of all the things the king has done for his people, laws/regulations, blessings that come from keeping the law, and curses that will flow from breaking the laws. But, of course, Israel’s covenant was not with some earthly king, but with God himself, the one true god.
- The Law given by Moses was seen as a delight by the Israelites, not a burden. The Law is God’s instruction to Israel on how they are to live in relationship with him. There is one God, one people, one land, one place to worship, and one Law.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

When we get to John 8, we find a Jesus who attacks his opponents with sharp words and holds nothing back. He couldn’t be clearer. As he says, “I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe I AM” (v. 24). His opponents don’t “get it,” and, if they don’t, they’re doomed. How would you reconcile this with the picture of a “meek and mild” Jesus that so many seem to have in their heads? Do you see why the central question is always, “Who is Jesus?” The answers that Jesus himself gives are answers that only Christians affirm. This sharp division between believer and unbeliever, between those who live in the light and those who live in the darkness are much more sharply drawn in John’s gospel than in the synoptic gospels. Why do you think this is? What might have driven John to write a different sort of gospel?

In the opening prologue of John’s gospel, Jesus is the life and “the light of all people” (1:4). It is such an astounding claim. Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is in eternal fellowship with God. All that is came to be through Jesus. Jesus is God! So . . . why then did the “world” not know him (v. 10 in the prologue and in virtually every chapter thereafter)? How could the creation turn on the creator? Why did Jesus’ own not receive him? You’ll see in this gospel that, despite Jesus’ power to heal and to save, many people who encounter him do not believe. Why do you think that Jesus was, and is, rejected by so many people? How could so many who walked with him and heard him could fail to see that he was the light?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In 2007, the Lenten sermon series was drawn from John's Gospel. We read through the Gospel that year and the daily readings for this Lent will again take us through the entire Gospel.

<p>Monday, John 3:22-36 Jesus and John the Baptist. More of John's testimony to Jesus. Verses 31-36 are from the narrator. Why so much emphasis on testimony?</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 4:1-30 Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well. What sort of healing do you think she needs? What is the point of their conversation about worship?</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 4:31-45 What is the food that Jesus has to eat after his encounter with the Samaritan woman (v. 33) and how does it nourish him? The Samaritans are not Jews. When many of them come to belief, what title do they give Jesus? What is its significance?</p>	<p>Thursday, John 4:46-54 Jesus heals the son of an official. What makes the official different from so many who come to Jesus seeking help or reassurance? What surprises Jesus? What gifts are the official and his family given by Jesus?</p>
<p>Friday, John 5:1-18 Jesus heals a crippled man on the Sabbath. What does this story reveal about Jesus? About God? Note that "the Jews" is John's way of referring to the Jewish leaders, not to all Jews. After all, Jesus was Jewish.</p>	<p>Saturday, John 5:19-46 Typically, Jesus delivers a discourse after the confrontation with the Pharisees. What do the Father and Son share? What do you think Jesus means when he says that the hour is "now here, when the dead will hear the voice of God" (5:25)? What and who testifies to Jesus?</p>

