

Jesus – “I am....”¹ – Before Abraham

Reading: John 8:58 “.... I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM¹”

Introduction:

This lesson is the first in a series on the “*I am*” statements made by Jesus. The aim of these lessons is for us to learn more about the nature and attributes of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Throughout the gospel of **John**, Jesus described Himself in various ways using the phrase, “*I am...*”. For example, in **John 6:35**, He described Himself as “... *the bread of life ...*” In **John 8:12**, He described Himself as “... *the light of the world ...*”. In this series of lessons, we will be looking at some of these “*I am*” sayings, and searching the scriptures to find out what He meant by them.

In this lesson, we will be looking at Jesus’ statement in **John 8:58** where He said, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM*”.

LESSON

1) Background

a) Context

In the later part of **John 8**, Jesus discussed various issues with the Jews, with Abraham being one of the central points of the discussion. However, these Jews misunderstood His statements about how following the truth would make them free (vs.**31-36**). Their view was that they were already free, being Abraham’s descendants. Jesus replied that if they truly were Abraham’s descendants, then they would do the works of Abraham, rather than seek to kill Him (vs.**37-40**). The Jews then suggested that He was a Samaritan with a demon (vs.**48**) - a double insult, given the intense dislike the Jews had for Samaritans (e.g. **John 4:9b**).

After denying that He had a demon, Jesus then said that anyone who kept His word would not taste death (vs.**51**). Again, the Jews misunderstood what He meant by “*death*”². They knew that Abraham was faithful to God, yet he had died almost two thousand years earlier, so in their eyes, Jesus was talking rubbish (vs.**52-53a**). In the context of their question, “*Who do You make Yourself out to be?*” (vs.**53b**), Jesus said to them, “*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and saw it and was glad.*”. This really had the Jews confused, and they replied, “*You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?*” (vs.**56-57**). Jesus then made His statement that “... *before Abraham was, I AM.*” (vs.**58**). The Jews then attempted to stone Him, but He slipped away from them unharmed (vs.**59**).

b) Jesus pre-existed Abraham

There is a difference between the two words used in **John 8:58** with regard to Abraham and Jesus. The word “*was*”, used in reference to Abraham, means that Abraham was here for a finite period, but is no longer present. That is, he

¹ All biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

² By “*death*”, Jesus meant spiritual death (e.g. **Romans 6:23**; **Ephesians 2:1**), not physical death. Physical death happens to everyone, be they faithful to God or not – **Hebrews 9:27**.

Jesus – “I am....”¹ – Before Abraham

was born at some point, lived here on earth for a period of time, and then died (physically) – he is no longer living among us here on earth.

But the word “AM” as used with regard to Jesus means that He exists, with no start or end points – *i.e.* He is eternal; He always was, He always is, and He always will be. There are many passages in the scriptures to show the eternal nature of Jesus, and we will now consider some of them in the next part of this lesson.

2) The eternal nature of Jesus

a) Jesus always was, always is, and always will be part of the God-head

In **John 1:1**, we read the following;

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Firstly, we see that this entity called “*the Word*” existed “*in the beginning*” – *i.e.* at the very start of things - “*the Word*” has always been there. There was never a time when “*the Word*” wasn’t there. Secondly, we see that the Word was in the presence of God – the Word was in existence in the same place where God exists. And thirdly, not only did “*the Word*” exist with God, but “*the Word*” also was God itself. When you put “*with God*” and “*was God*” together, it implies that there are at least two parts to God, and both of these parts existed together in the same place³.

Then we come to **John 1:14**;

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

This entity called “*the Word*”, which pre-existed in company with God, and was God, came to earth, took on fleshly form and lived among men. And who was this “*Word in the flesh*”? In the next verse, **15**, and verses **29-30**, John the baptiser identifies that person as being Jesus.

Therefore, it was Jesus who was with God the Father in the beginning, and who was also God Himself.

b) Jesus was still God when He left heaven to come to earth

From **2 Corinthians 4:16**, we learn that, in our earthly existence, there are two parts to us. Firstly, there is the outward man, *i.e.* our physical bodies which we can see and touch, and which eventually dies. Secondly, there is the inner man, our soul, that invisible part of us that is spiritual and eternal. **James 2:26** also bears out this fact that we are made up of both our physical body and our spiritual body. When our physical bodies die, the spiritual body leaves the physical body – *e.g.* **Genesis 35:18**, **1 Kings 17:17-22**.

Now with regard to Jesus, His physical body on earth started with the miraculous conception between the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary (**Luke 1:26-35**). But as we saw above, His spiritual nature has been from everlasting. And so, at the appropriate time, He left His home in glory to come and dwell

³ There is a third part to the God-head – the Holy Spirit – *e.g.* **1 John 5:7**; **John 15:26**.

Jesus – “I am....”¹ – Before Abraham

in His physical body here on earth (**Philippians 2:5-7**). That is why He was called “*Immanuel*”, because He was God living with us (**Matthew 1:23**).

When Jesus came to earth, He did not change from being God – He was still “*being in the form of God*” (**Philippians 2:6**). Rather, He changed His role. Instead of being in heaven with God the Father, He gave up that position (or role), and took on the form of a servant; a man.

To illustrate this concept, imagine that I am a director of a company. Along with other directors, I have the power and authority to hire and fire CEOs, and set the direction of the company. Then suppose that one day I choose to give up my director position and become a janitor in the company’s building. In my new position, I would no longer have the power and authority to hire and fire CEOs, *etc.* Rather, I would have to do as the other directors and the CEO tell me to do. But even though I would have changed roles, I would still be the same “me”, with the same personal characteristics, talents and abilities that I previously had.

And so it was with Jesus. He gave up His position of power and authority in heaven and became a man. In His new role as a man, He did and spoke as the Father commanded Him (**John 9:4; 12:49**). But although He was in the form of a man, He was still God. Various passages in the scriptures show this;

- When people saw Jesus, they saw God

John 14:9 “... *he who has seen Me (Jesus) has seen the Father ...*”

Colossians 2:9 “*For in Him (Jesus) dwells all the fullness of the God-head bodily;*”

Hebrews 1:3 “(Jesus) ... *being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person*”

- He allowed people to worship Him

Neither men nor angels are to be worshipped, but God alone.

- see **Matthew 4:10; Acts 10:25-26; 14:13-15; Revelation 22:8-9**.

But Jesus accepted the worship of others towards Him.

- see **Matthew 8:2; 14:33; 28:9 John 9:35-38; 20:28**.

c) **Jesus has returned to heaven as part of Godhead**

Having fulfilled the Father’s plan on earth, Jesus returned to heaven to take His place again with the Father. He is now both Lord and Christ (**Acts 2:36**). He is at the Father’s right hand (**Acts 7:56; Hebrews 12:2**), making intercession for us (**Hebrews 7:25**). He has been highly exalted, given the name which is above all names (**Philippians 2:9**). He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (**Matthew 28:18; 1 Peter 3:22**). He is the King of kings and Lord of lords (**Revelation 17:14; 19:16**). In **1 Timothy 1:17**, the apostle Paul writes in relation to Jesus;

“Now to the king eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Jesus always was God, and is God. He is the same “.... *yesterday, today, and forever*” (**Hebrews 13:8**). That is why Jesus was able to rightly say, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.*” (**John 8:58**).

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3) Application

The Jewish leaders at the time of **John 8:58** simply saw Jesus as another man, aged in His thirties⁴. They failed to accept the ample evidence that He was indeed God – God living in a human body. Therefore they rejected His statement that “... *before Abraham was, I am ...*”. As a result of their refusal to accept Him as God, they rejected His authority. They considered Him a blasphemer when He spoke of God the Father being His Father (**John 5:17-18**). They rejected His words (**Luke 5:21; John 9:24, 29**), and they looked for ways to get rid of Him (**John 11:53**).

But what about us? How do we view Jesus?

Some people today may say that Jesus was “*just another prophet*”, or that He was “*just a good man*”. Jesus was indeed a prophet, for He spoke what the Father told Him to speak (**John 12:49**), and He was indeed good, for He did not sin (**Hebrews 4:15**). But He was, and is, more than just those things. He was and is also God, part of the God-head (**Matthew 28:19b**). The apostle John states in **John 20:30-31** one of the main reasons for his gospel;

“ And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 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.”

Mankind has indeed been blessed that Jesus left the glories of heaven and came to live here as a man. He came to be the sacrifice for our sins, so that we can have salvation (**Romans 5:8-9**). Although He spent time here as a man, He was still God – He was, and is, the “*I AM*”.

Therefore, we need to honour Him as God, obey Him as our Lord and Master, and praise Him as our Saviour.

⁴ In **Luke 3:23**, we read that Jesus started His ministry when He was about 30 years old.