

Chapter 7

The Gospel of John

Chapter 7 opens by describing a controversy between Jesus and his brothers. So much for the Roman Catholic doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity. This doctrine is not based on anything found in scripture. Rather, when the Roman Empire was forcefully converted to Christianity, the folks needed a female replacement for certain pagan goddesses. Mary was the best possible choice because her womb bore the Son of God. But it didn't seem right for a feminine replacement of pagan goddesses to have born children the old-fashioned way. Therefore, in order to preserve her special place in salvation history, the church declared, contrary to the evidence, that she must have remained a virgin. Not only that, she herself must have been conceived without the benefit of a human father. Never mind what the disciples of Jesus knew. The Holy Spirit, who is responsible for growing church traditions and papal decrees, said otherwise.

Be that as it may, the Gospel of John said otherwise. Jesus had brothers. Moreover, they weren't particularly cooperative. Jesus was going "about in Galilee." He was not yet ready for his final trip to Judea "because the Jews (Jewish authorities) "were looking for an opportunity to kill him." Not that he was afraid of death. Rather, "...my time has not yet fully come." There was more God had for him to do before giving his life.

His brothers, who did not yet believe in him, suggest that he go to Jerusalem for the Festival of Booths. This was one of three pilgrimage festivals where Jews were required to go to Jerusalem. Their argument was based on the idea that Jesus needed to make his "signs" public in order to become widely known. He sees through this thinly veiled desire to get rid of him. (His brothers were perhaps embarrassed by his publicity.) And Jesus responds by telling them to go. He adds that while his time has not come, their time is always here. I take this to mean that their time to accept the fact that God was calling them to faith was now. They refuse. So Jesus remains in Galilee, and his brothers remain stuck in their ignorance and unbelief.

This opening paragraph (7:1-9) was clearly designed to illustrate the tensions between Jesus and his family, for John then goes on to say that both Jesus and his disciples travelled to Jerusalem for this festival. However, they did not travel together. Jesus went "in secret" presumably because he wanted to avoid the authorities. Despite his desire to remain anonymous, his presence stirred-up "the crowd." Some liked him. Some accused him of "deceiving the crowd." However, no one wanted to speak publicly "for fear of the Jews."

"About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach." (Vs. 14). Apparently, despite the plot against his life, he felt compelled to do what his Father directed him to do. The temple was the most public place possible for

him to teach. No one would have not known he was there. This is another illustration of the fact that, in John's gospel, Jesus is always in control of events. Or rather, his Father is in control. He is never worried about how things will turn out. He already knows. This was an opportunity to teach and answer questions, so he took it.

The first question the crowd has in this: "How does this man have this learning?" Clearly, people knew he came from Galilee, a region occupied by Jewish peasants. There was no "University of Galilee" so these folks would have been entirely unschooled. This being the case, how did Jesus come to have these remarkable skills? He answers as you might expect. His teaching does not come from any human source. Nor is it his. It came from "him who sent me." Otherwise, he points out, he would be seeking his own "glory." As it is, he is seeking the glory of God. This means that everything he says is "true." There is nothing false in God.

He then, as usual, throws the ball back in their court by asking why they seek to kill him. If they are followers of Moses, this means they are breaking the law. They respond in a way that illustrates just how far they are from recognizing the truth. "You have a demon!" Jesus then points out that their desire to do him in was based on the idea that he broke the law by healing a man on the Sabbath. And yet, they regularly circumcise on the Sabbath. How is it that he breaks the law by healing on the Sabbath? They judge by "appearance." This leads others to speculate as to whether or not Jesus may be the Messiah. While they know where he is from—they are not supposed to know where the Messiah came from. (This is one tradition; the other is that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem.) Nevertheless, he performed "signs" which suggested he may be the Messiah. Jesus tells them that he came from, God, of whom they know nothing.

The authorities send police to arrest him. Jesus responds by taking the conversation to another level, which confuses everyone. He will be going to God, and so they will not be able to find him. They speculate that he may be going to "the Greeks" to teach them. Again, the point is that they are in complete ignorance of who he or God is. John then shifts the narrative to the last day of the festival. Jesus then cries out that he will give believers "living water," just as he told the woman from Samaria. John then observes that this living water is the Spirit which believers would receive after his "glorification," i.e., his death and resurrection.

This triggers a division in the crowd. Some think he may be the Messiah, but others don't because the Messiah is not to come from Galilee. The temple police also give up on arresting him because, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" The authorities, among whom is also Nicodemus, accuse the police of having been deceived by him. Nicodemus, who is still unsure about Jesus, says the law does not convict a person without a hearing. The others, whose motives are highly questionable, respond by saying no prophet is to come from Galilee. He must therefore be guilty.

Thus endeth Chapter 7

Chapter 8

As Chapter 8 opens, the crowd disperses and Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives, across the valley and east of the temple mount. But then he comes back to the temple to teach. The brief interlude was for prayer and communing with his Father—something we also ought to do.

At this point in the narrative, a story was inserted into John. The early and most reliable manuscripts we have of John's gospel do not include this story. Moreover, it shows up in one older manuscript of Luke's gospel. Perhaps at some point, while the canon was being debated, church authorities decided it looked best in John. It most definitely circulated orally before this and was perhaps conserved because of its clear teaching on forgiveness—not to mention that it looks like something Jesus would have done.

The scribes and Pharisees, those who knew and taught the law of Moses, decide to test Jesus again. Their true motives are to generate evidence against him for a trial. They bring a suspect who committed adultery and who had eyewitnesses to confirm her crime. This was normally punishable by stoning to death. "What say you, Jesus?" First he writes something in the ground. Who knows what that was? But then he renders his judgment--as usual--by turning the question back on the crowd who are eager to start throwing. Anyone who has no sin is welcome to begin. This effectively puts on trial those who had put her on trial. Moreover, since everyone knew they were guilty, executing her was now out of the question.

This is what the story does: First, it humanizes the adulteress. While she's guilty, she nevertheless remains no different from anyone else. Secondly, it forces the crowd to confront their own sin. The accusers become the accused. Thirdly, the story suggests that from Jesus' point of view, people can be redeemed from their sin instead of punished and executed for it. Jesus sees "sinners" as people whose lives can be changed. Because God loves us, he seeks to redeem rather than destroy us for our sin.

However, redemption is much more than forgiveness. For, after the crowds leave, he frees her with the words, "Go, and sin no more." Redemption is a process whereby the love of God in Jesus Christ conveys both forgiveness and the power to change. We are, as Luther said, at any given time, both saints and sinners. We continue to sin. But through grace, we are given the ability to change for the better. This is called "sanctification."

Jesus then engages in a brief discussion concerning the validity of his testimony. He is "the light of the world" because he brings the knowledge of God to us. That is, in him, God is present. This being the case, everything he says is valid. God's word does not need to be justified or proven. God's word validates itself because it is true by definition. Those Jesus is speaking to are ignorant of this because they cannot

see God in Jesus. That is, they have not been given the gift of the Spirit, which also gives us the ability to “see God.”

Jesus then predicts his death and resurrection by saying they cannot go where he is going. Since Jesus is once again speaking on a level they cannot as yet see, they speculate that perhaps he is going to kill himself—that this is what he means. He responds by pointing out that they are from below and therefore cannot understand his level of meaning. He is from above and he speaks from this point of view. That is, he is at one with God because he came from God. He is fully aware of God’s presence in his life and of God’s will for him. He acts on this basis. They act on the basis of being of the world. They cannot see God, nor can they judge things from this point of view. Their only access to God is through faith in Jesus Christ. These words led many to “believe in him.”

Jesus then addresses these folks, telling them that if they continue in his work, they will be made free. Not comprehending the level of discourse he is on, they protest that as “children of Abraham” they have never been slaves to anyone. They are on an earthly level of discourse, Jesus on a “heavenly” level. The freedom he speaks of is freedom from the law as that to which their wills have become slaves. The law is their means of achieving “righteousness” and acceptability before God and the community. This therefore is what controls their behavior.

They believe doing the law keeps them from sin. However, sin is best understood here as acting out of self-interest. They do the law because it is in their self-interest to do so. It enables them to feel right in the face of God and others. The flip side is that it also causes them to condemn others and, were they to break the law, condemn themselves as well.

This is the slavery Jesus speaks of—slavery to the self that lives in alienation from God. They need the law as a tool to make them feel righteous precisely because they live in separation from God who alone can give them the love that will make them righteous. In order to be reconciled to God, they need someone who can bring God to them. At present, God is beyond them. They do not know God, nor do they know how to find God. It is this dilemma Jesus came to overcome. He brings us God by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Since the Spirit comes from him, we receive the Spirit through faith in him. Moreover, as we continue in his word over time—the word that in him, God reconciles us to himself—we come closer to God. This frees us from the need to make ourselves righteous through the law because, as we grow closer to God, the need to sin subsides. But this is a life-long journey. Complete reconciliation and freedom come at the end of time.

To be continued with Chapter 9