

'Who Art Thou' Ch. 8:21-59

by Charles Alexander

The sermon explores the necessity of revelation and repentance for understanding the true identity of Christ and the nature of God.

Topics: "Divine Revelation", "Repentance And Salvation"

Description

Charles Alexander delves into the profound revelation of God and Christ through repentance and the revealing act of the Holy Spirit, emphasizing that true knowledge of God can only be attained through divine revelation and repentance. The verses from Matthew highlight the exclusive knowledge of the Son by the Father and the necessity of Christ's revelation for understanding God's true deity. The sermon underscores the evangelical nature of revealing deity to man, emphasizing the importance of humility, repentance, and belief for salvation. Through various biblical references, the sermon explores the conflict between earthly expectations of a messianic kingdom and the spiritual fulfillment through repentance and belief in Christ, ultimately leading to the revelation of God's true nature and the impending fate of those who reject Christ.

Transcript

To know God and to know Christ is a matter of revelation, and this revealing act of the Holy Spirit is given only where there is repentance: "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matt. 11:25).

The divine Being is known absolutely only to One who is Himself deity, which is another way of saying that God can only be known truly by Himself. "No man knoweth the Son but the Father: neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son and he to whom the Son will reveal him" (Matt. 11:27).

These verses are invincible testimony to the Biblical doctrine of God and the true deity of Christ the Son. If only the Son knows the Father, then the Son is not only God in His own right but (seeing the words are His own) He enjoyed in the days of His incarnation the full knowledge and self-consciousness of Himself as God and in Him (who was both Son of Man and Son of God in one glorious Person) the full deity dwells in complete and perfect manifestation.

The revelation of deity to man is evangelical in its nature - that is, it is fundamental to man's salvation. Where the soul is not receptive to this testimony, the cause is to be found in pride of heart and the love of sin.

The idea that Christ ever could or would "offer" Himself as King of Israel apart from individual repentance, is as far from the spirit of the divine revelation as anything could be. His herald, John the Baptist, administered "baptism unto death" as the sign of the New Covenant of Grace (the promised Kingdom of God), to those who were truly repentant. Repentance was the first word, likewise, in the earthly ministry of Christ (Matthew 4:17 - "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand").

The Sermon on the Mount is not as some have strangely taught "The divine constitution for the righteous government of the earth", but is quite simply and plainly an exposition of the true doctrine of repentance. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" is hardly a formula to build the grandeur and pomp of an earthly empire upon. It is a simple declaration of what repentance is and what it does. It was the plainest of warnings to the nation of Israel that their expectation of a messianic kingdom founded upon their Abrahamic descent was a fatal delusion. The only place where the kingdom of heaven is found is in a humble and contrite heart.

This principle is so plain and so universal in the Bible that it is matter for constant amazement that good Christians do not perceive that it is the key to the understanding of all prophecy concerning the messianic kingdom. That kingdom can never be of an earthly, national or visible nation seeing that its substance is spiritual and heavenly, and its introduction to the soul is revelatory, having to do with repenting and believing.

It is around this spiritual principle that the conflict raged during the Lord's earthly presentation of Himself to the people of Israel. A king who would deliver them from their Roman overlords was very much to their liking - and still is. The restoration of David's throne at Jerusalem with the rightful dynastic heir as its occupant was what they sought. But One who presented Himself to them in terms of His own deity and equality with the Eternal Father and spoke only of repentance and a spiritual fulfillment of the promises, they could not receive or tolerate.

Here was the Lord of the temple standing in "the treasury" thereof, declaring unto them, "Ye neither know me, nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also" (John 8: 19). He had received and forgiven the wretched woman taken in adultery. They could not reconcile their minds to this form of messianic activity. When He who claimed to be their Messiah went on to assume divine honours as though He were equal with Almighty God, their prejudice flamed to such a height that before the day ended they were reaching for the very stones originally intended for the pardoned adulteress (verse 59).

Before they could carry out that mischief a divine restraint was imposed upon them - "no man laid hands on him) for his hour was not yet come" (v.20). The messianic mission of the Son of God must pursue its relentless course until the appointed "hour" when He should be "lifted up" to bear creation's curse and expiate the world's sin. Till then, no human hand or Satanic power could arrest His course, but

"When ye have lifted up the Son of Man then shall ye know that I AM" (v.28).

THEY WOULD DIE IN THEIR SINS

The time had come for the Lord to speak to the Jewish nation more plainly as to their impending fate. The murder of the Son of God was already taking shape in their minds. Divine sovereignty alone held them back from laying hands upon Him to destroy Him there and then. Impenitence and pride had already blinded them to the true identity of the One who stood in their midst. But they would not be permitted to

pursue their purpose till words of solemn and prophetic warning had fallen upon their ears:

"Then said Jesus again unto them. I go my way and ye shall seek me and shall die in, your sins. Whither I go ye cannot come" (verse 21).

Here is Omniscience, to whom all events past and future are eternally present, declaring through lips which were human the fate of the sinful nation whose representatives were even then crowding around the Victim whom they despised and rejected: YE SHALL DIE IN YOUR SINS.

This prophecy is the deathknell of the national hopes of Israel. It is a clear foretelling of that dreadful event which fell upon the nation 40 years later - the destruction of city, temple, priesthood and nation by the Roman legions in A.D.70. All history faithfully records that they "died in their sins", persisting to the last in their hatred of the Nazarene and His Church and kingdom, deluded by their false messiahs and frantic, fanatical expectations that God would intervene and deliver them from the Roman conquerors. All in vain! These solemn words of the Saviour were verified at length in the ruin of city and nation.

"Ye shall seek me" (v.21) does not mean an evangelical and repentant seeking after Christ but is to be linked with what follows "and shall die in your sins" - meaning plainly that they should cry to God for deliverance from their foes but should not be heard because they had already rejected their God - namely Himself. This deep saying of Christ is another enforcement of His own deity and of the falseness of their own profession of allegiance to the true God. He had already declared to them (verse 19) "Ye neither know me nor my Father: if ye had known me ye should have known my Father also". This was the fundamental fault with their religious ideas. They had a fanaticism that as theirs was the only true religion they were automatically acceptable to God (whereas the real truth was that their conception of God was utterly false, and not according to the scripture which they professed to hold dear). True knowledge of God is only possible on the ground of individual repentance and of true repentance they had none. A humble and contrite heart would have brought them into the company of those who "looked for redemption in Israel" and like Simeon and Anna in the temple at the time of the Saviour's birth, they would have recognised the Lord's Christ.

The fundamental nature of sin lies in pride. By pride the soul is blinded and cannot see God, yet supposes that the religion it possesses is the true religion. There is no place in external religion for poverty of spirit, mourning for sin, or true aspiration after heart purity, or hunger and thirst after righteousness. Hence these people knew not God: "Ye neither know me nor my Father. If ye had known me ye should have known my Father also'. The Saviour had earlier warned these people, "Ye shall seek me and shall not find me" (chap. 7:34), and now, with increasing severity, "Ye shall seek me and shall die in your sins". This "seeking" on their part was their ineffectual crying to God for deliverance when their city was invested by the iron regiments of Caesar. There was, of course, no crying after the Christ whom they crucified. The Saviour's reference to Himself - "Ye shall seek ME..." was a profound declaration that HE WAS THEIR GOD and in rejecting Him they were rejecting their God and destroying their only hope. "Whither I go ye cannot. Come", for they had judged themselves unfit for the kingdom of heaven.

The theologies which deny the absolute deity of Christ and the mystery of the Holy Trinity, have never come to a reckoning with these profound statements of Christ.

"I AM FROM ABOVE"

"And he said unto them, Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world" (v.23). Here again the Lord asserts His participation in Absolute Godhead. There is a dispute among theologians as to whether "from beneath" and "of this world" refer merely to the earthly state of humanity in general; or whether there is therein a reference to the fallen state of humanity in sin and death. Perhaps both are included. The First Man is of the earth, earthy. The "Second Man" (Christ) is the Lord from heaven (1 Cor. 15:47). But man remains "of the earth" because of his sin, and he needs to be born again "from above" (John 3:3, margin). This is a veritable token of man's fallen and sinful state, and his need for participation in a new creation coming down "from above". Christ is "from above", God-become-Man. The earthly mind of these Jewish hearers could not comprehend this. This unbelief sprang from that region ("from beneath") which Christ more pointedly expresses lower down when He declares, "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do" (v.44). By contrast, He who came down from above was none other than God Himself, mysteriously incarnate as Man, who came into our nature and state that He might, in the mystery of the atonement, reconcile heaven and earth, and raise fallen man in union with Himself to the throne of creation beyond all possibility of return to the region of sin and death.

Hence He quickly refers to His impending crucifixion in the words "When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me I speak these things" (v.28).

The co-equal, co-eternal Son takes the subordinate place of Servant, in obedience to the Father's will, in order that the will of the Father in the restoration of Divine order to creation should be realised. He was not saying that immediately following upon His crucifixion these unbelievers and gainsayers would know of His true Godhead, for that certainly did not take place, but He was warning them that the calamities which would fall upon them as a consequence of this rejection and crucifixion - calamities which quickly resulted in their destruction as a nation - would furnish every proof that His words were true and that they had been guilty of the supreme crime of crucifying their God and King.

The crime of the Jewish nation was not, of course, theirs alone. Wherever the Word of God is preached, they who reject the testimony of Christ are as guilty of "crucifying the Son of God afresh" as the handful of conspirators, from among the priests, Pharisees and scribes, who originally played their part in the process of betraying and condemning Him. They who turn from the Gospel word shall know in due time who He is whom they have despised and rejected.

THE THREEFOLD "I AM"

The importance of our Lord's dialogue in this chapter of John lies in the threefold assertion of His absolute divinity in verses 24, 28, and 58:

"If ye believe not that I am (he)...."

"Then shall ye know that I am (he)...."

"Before Abraham was, I am".

In the first two quotations the personal pronoun "he" is italicised (in our English version). It does not occur in the original.

The incarnation of God is a great mystery and must inevitably be considered in relation to the equally incomprehensible mystery of the Holy Trinity. God is One, without division of substance, yet in Three

Persons co-equal in their possession of the one entire Godhead. That is, the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, yet there are not three Gods but One God. There is neither confusion of Persons nor division of substance. Hence the full deity is possessed in each of the three Persons, or, in theological language, there is to be recognised in the Godhead three HYPOSTASES, or MODES of BEING, so that at one and the same time the Godhead is seen as Father, as Son, and as the Holy Spirit, yet with perfect preservation of the uniqueness and individuality of the Three Persons who are not to be confused; nor is the unity of the Godhead to be divided between them. The Godhead exists as Father, also as Son, also as the Holy Spirit, remaining as Three Persons each with His appropriate characteristics, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Moreover, it is of first importance to recognise that the Father is Spirit, the Son is Spirit and the Holy Ghost is Spirit, yet there are not three Spirits but one Spirit. He whom we recognise as the Holy Spirit is the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, the Spirit of both, yet exclusive to neither, and therefore a Third Person. Hence Paul in one verse describes the Holy Spirit as the "Spirit of God" (that is, of the Father) and the "Spirit of Christ" (Romans 8:9).

Again, there is a precise "order" in the Godhead, so that it is proper to consider the Father as the FIRST PERSON, the Son as the SECOND and the Holy Spirit as the THIRD. Yet this order does not imply an order of TIME, as though the Father only is eternal. The Father is uncreated, the Son uncreated and the Holy Spirit is uncreated. The Father is eternal, without beginning; so also is the Son and so also is the Holy Spirit. The Father is the fountain of deity, not made nor begotten. The Son is begotten, not made. The Holy Spirit is not made, nor begotten, but "proceeding". There was never a state when the Father was alone. The Son was "eternally begotten" and the Holy Spirit was eternally "proceeding". Where the One Person is, there are the Three.

This wonder, this mystery, is comprehensible only in so far as we consider that GOD IS LOVE - pure, eternal love, without body or parts, without division or extent, without measure or dimension, transcending all space and time, yet immanent, that is, inherent, or subjective, in all. He is LOVE not as an impersonal emotion, but as a relationship of Persons in the one essence of love. LOVE must have its Subject, its Object, and its Communion and this is perfectly and eternally realised- the Godhead in Three Persons.

GOD BECOMES MAN

The incarnation ("the Word became flesh") was the entry of God to His own creation, and this He chose to do by becoming MAN. Yet in this great descent from the highest to the lowest; from true God to true Man "with reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting"; the Only Begotten of the Father did not cease to be God. In the One Eternal Spirit, the communion of the Persons in the Godhead remained, yet He who was born of the Virgin laid aside the glory and the prerogatives of Godhead (without relinquishing them) in order that as true Man He might become the Suffering Servant of the Father and in obedience even unto death, procure in death the redemption of His people and in victory over death, never again to die, should rise in His true humanity (never to be discarded or abandoned) to the Eternal Throne. Thus the final mystery of creation is attained - the unity of Man with God in the Lordship of Creation. This was the original purpose of God in creating MAN (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8: 4-6; Hebrews 2: 5-9).

This oneness of Man with God by which God designed eternally to reveal Himself and make Himself visible and intelligible in a communion of Eternal Love, was the subject of the Son's last dedicatory prayer in the Upper Room on the eve of His rejection and crucifixion.

"That they all may be one; as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be One, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one: and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me." (John 17: 21-23).

HIS BOYHOOD CONFESSION OF DEITY

Christ's human consciousness of His own divinity and the mystery of His equality with the Father from all eternity, is first clearly attested in His temple utterance at the age of 12 (His first recorded human words), "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business" (Luke 2:49). This declaration that God was His Father, in a special, unique, relationship would not at that age have been the result of information supplied by His virgin mother (who at that time was in no position to understand or define her Son's relation to the Godhead). The knowledge so profoundly expressed could have been conveyed to Him only in the developing consciousness of His boyhood as He meditated upon the scriptural notices (in the Old Testament) of His own Messiah-hood. His knowledge of the O.T. had already amazed the doctors in the temple and there seems no reason to doubt that His questions to those learned men were of the same nature as that paralyzing question He put to these same men (or their representatives) at the end of His public ministry -- "What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?" (See Matt. 22:41-46). After all, it was on this question alone that He was condemned and crucified (Matt. 26: 63-66).

The germ of that early boyhood declaration of His own eternal Sonship (how appropriately, too, in the temple?) developed and flourished as He grew into Manhood and was confirmed at the age of 30 at the baptism in the Jordan by the voice of the Almighty Father in heaven - "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased". This voice from the Eternal Throne came a second time on the Mount of Transfiguration when the three principal apostles, Peter, James and John heard the glorious words "This is my beloved Son - hear ye him". Finally when nearing the time of His crucifixion, there occurred the wondrous divine colloquy between heaven and earth When the Son cried "Father, glorify thy name" and the Voice replied in the roll of the everlasting thunders - "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again". How solemn was this final attestation of the Father to the Son as publicly the Saviour addressed the Eternal as FATHER! (John 12:28).

WHO ART THOU?

Our attention is specially directed to verse 25 of John 8 where a profound reply is given to the question put by the Jews: "WHO ART THOU?" The answer of the Lord is - "Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning". This sentence is not to be passed over as though the Lord were simply saying - "I have already told you and have continued to tell you from the commencement of my ministry amongst you". We may dismiss this simple explanation on two grounds. The first is that the question put by the Jews is an incredulous and provocative response to what Christ had just declared (verse 24, "If ye believe not that I AM (he) ye shall die in your sins"). The second ground lies in the enigmatic nature of the Lord's reply which not only baffled His interrogators 2,000 years ago, but has baffled many theologians ever since. For our Lord was actually quoting from an Old Testament scripture affirming His absolute deity, and that scripture is ISAIAH 48: 12-16. We place in parallel columns the prophecy from Isaiah and the Lord's affirmation identifying Himself therewith. Readers will note that we have brought in an additional saying of Christ from John 18:20 spoken when Christ was brought before the High Priest at Jerusalem:

ISAIAH 48

12. Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; I am he; I am the first, I also am the last.

13. Mine hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spanned the heavens; when I call unto them, they stand up together.

16. Come ye near unto me, hear ye this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I; and now the Lord God, and his Spirit, hath sent me.

John 8

23. And he said to them, Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world.

24. I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins; for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.

25. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? And Jesus saith unto them, Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning.

ISAIAH 45

18. For thus saith the Lord that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited; I am the Lord; and there is none else.

19. I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth; I said not unto the seed of Jacob, seek ye me in vain; I the Lord speak righteousness, I declare things that are right.

JOHN 18

19. The high priest then asked Jesus of his disciples and of his doctrine.

20. Jesus answered him, I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret I have said nothing.

The I AM HE of Isaiah 48:12 is associated in the following verse with the act of creation. Christ's corresponding I AM HE of John 8:24 likewise is associated with His own exaltation above all creation (therefore Himself being the Creator) in the words, I AM NOT OF THIS WORLD (V.23) and the succeeding verse 25, "Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning".

This fundamental assertion of His own deity Christ further avows in the trial which led to His crucifixion, and it was the final reason for that crucifixion. In the quotation John 18:20 above, Christ tells the High Priest, "In secret have I said nothing," and the robed hypocrite who sat to judge Him ought to have known that this was the voice of the Creator who long ago had said in Isaiah, "I have not spoken in secret..." (see above).

The EGO EIMI (I AM) of John 8:24, and the ANI HU (The Hebrew phonetically written) of Jehovah's "I am he" of Isaiah 48:12, are one and the same. They meet in Christ, the Second Person, the Eternal Son, the

divine LOGOS of John 1:1, the Only Begotten, and He is God.

The unbelieving, almost contemptuous, "Who art thou?" of these Jews expresses not only the unbelief and aversion of an entire nation but pathetically also denotes the incompetence of fallen man to apprehend the mystery of deity. Eternal Wisdom replies in words which come deep from the unfathomable abyss of deity:

"Even the beginning, I am that which I am, expressed and revealed in what I say."

Those who are acquainted with the Greek will know something of the extreme difficulty of interpreting from the Greek of John the apostle, the sentence uttered by Christ, not in Greek but probably in Aramaic dialect (then current in Palestine where Hebrew was long since a dead language). This difficulty is reflected in the disagreements of great scholars as they have wrestled with the peculiarity of the sentence, which may be transliterated in our own English alphabet as follows:

TEN ARCHEN OTI KAI LALO UMIN

(The beginning that which even (also) I speak to you).

The first two words are in the accusative and this has resulted in much confusion of interpretation. Most are agreed that these two words must be taken adverbially, and this yields the sense, "From the beginning". There is an obvious parallel with Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," and with John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word". The same expression occurs frequently in John's writings, as in 1 John 2:13 - "Ye have known him that is from the beginning", but more definitely in the following where Christ is described absolutely as "THE BEGINNING" - "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending" (Revelation 1:8), "These things saith the Amen --the beginning of the creation of God" (Rev. 3:14) See also Paul in Colossians 1:18 - "Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead".

These verses not only establish that Christ was the originating cause of all the works of God but was THE BEGINNING who began all things, who was before all things and by whom all things consist, to whom all precedence and pre-eminence belong (Colossians 1:16-19). Solomon also says of Him, under the figure of Divine Wisdom personified, "I was set up from the beginning, or ever the earth was" (Proverbs 8:23).

When we read, "God spake and it was done," we are not to be so childish as to suppose an actual voice echoed through the void of non-existence THAT VOICE WAS CHRIST THE ETERNAL WORD. That WORD was a Person, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, One who was eternally with the Father in the Oneness of the Spirit, as His Wisdom, Love and Power personified. In short God's speech is Himself, the manifestation and putting forth of Himself in Person.

Not by grammar alone therefore is the text of Holy Scripture to be understood. The Lexicon must itself be regulated and fitted into the pattern of the prophetic word which is always its own interpreter. To know the mind of the Spirit is the very first qualification to the understanding of the God-breathed sentences. Vain is the erudition which is not preceded by divinity. Faith, repentance, true piety, must take precedence over verbal scholarship. The erudite without these qualities are like to those who sit at the mouth of the well and discourse of water but die for the want of it. They have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. The scholar must begin with the humble belief that here are the words of the Spirit, which can only be understood with the mind of the Spirit.

We side entirely with Augustine who wrote his commentary on John's Gospel, or rather preached it, to the humble artisans of Hippo (Carthage) in North Africa in the 4th century A. D. Admittedly not a Greek scholar of the first order, this great and holy man knew his God and knew his Bible, and when confronted by this great saying of the Lord in John 8:25, he unerringly knew where to put his finger in the search for the right interpretation. To him the answer of the Lord is plain: "I am THE BEGINNING FOR SO I ALSO SPEAK TO YOU". We humbly desire to concur with Augustine's interpretation and we are not alone.

(At the close of this paper we give the whole of Augustine's commentary on this important passage).

It might be objected that in using this enigmatic sentence Christ was only confusing His interrogators, for it is not conceivable that where scholars are embarrassed by the profundity or obscurity of the saying, the temple rabble of 2,000 years ago could have penetrated the inner meaning. There is something in the objection, of course, but it must be remembered that the sayings of the Lord are timeless and are intended for a wider audience than a nondescript collection of temple frequenters, utterly unqualified in any spiritual sense to understand deity. Nor is anyone in any age so qualified, unless it be by the preparation of the heart in true humility, repentance and earnest desire to know Him whom to know is life eternal. It might even have been a merciful thing to withhold from the scoffer and the incorrigible, a more direct answer to incredulity, and so spare the heightened condemnation reserved for the insufferable Caiaphas who received in the Judgment Hall so solemn a reply to his adjuration, "tell us if thou be the Christ, the Son of God".

Hear the reply of self-conscious omnipotence ablaze with prophetic anticipation of the realisation of His own glorious and divine destiny - "Thou hast said (Mark and Luke: "I AM"); nevertheless, I say unto you; hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in clouds of heaven"

(Matthew 26: 63-65).

The Lord speaks in concealed terms, yet abundantly clear to those who give themselves in true humility to the understanding of His words.

There is a world of meaning in that word translated in our version "I said (LALO) unto you". What Christ SAYS is Himself, His own glorious life, His eternal nature and being.

What He says, He IS. The breath of His mouth with which He utters His own Name and declares what He is, is His Spirit. This divine SPEAKING is "from the beginning" - that is, from all eternity the Godhead is self-revealing. The Eternal Spirit of God scrutinises the divine nature, so that God is revealed to Himself in the majesty and the mystery of Three Persons in the unity of perfect love.

"From the beginning" of His creative acts, God has been declaring Himself and making known to the intelligent creation, who and what He is in His eternal power and Godhead, so that (in the words of the inspired Psalmist),

"The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out throughout all the earth and their words to the end of the world". Psalm 19

This "speech" of God is so sure and true and so revelatory of Himself that all ignorance of it is culpable. The non-recognition of the true character of the Creator arises not from the natural darkness of the ignorant mind, but, from resistance to the clear and plain facts by which all men are surrounded. As Paul

declares to the Romans:

"That which may be known of God is manifest in them (the heathen), even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse". See Romans 1:19-25

In that great passage Paul shows that the darkness which covered, the heathen mind arose not from ignorance of God but from sinful preference. The true knowledge of God was to them a moral inconvenience. Because they "did not like to retain God in. their knowledge, God gave them over to a. reprobate mind to do those things which were not convenient...." (v. 28).

It is noteworthy that the worst sinners in the heathen world are not, and were not, the backward and savage tribes, but the cultured, civilised, highly educated and intellectually refined Graeco-Roman world where flourished those sages and poets, philosophers, scientists, artists, and sculptors, whose majestic monuments of refinement, art and pure thought are still the luxurious mine from which our modern civilisation has quarried so many of its finest achievements.

The unnatural vices, the drunkenness, debaucheries, and homo-sexualism, the incest and adulteries which polluted that refined age (so terribly exposed by Paul in Romans 1) advertised the aversion which the most civilised of mankind felt towards the divine SPEECH which invited them to feast upon the true wisdom of God.

The worst sinners and most repulsive exponents of heathenism are not found in the jungles of what used to be called "The Dark Continent" but in the streets and alleyways of Western civilisation in the salons of modern culture, and in many a lecture hall of our great universities.

THE LAST ARMAGEDDON

The unnatural vices of the highly cultured Graeco-Roman world of 2,000 years ago have returned, with accumulated interest and with far less excuse, to our modern western world, where the last dregs of Christian civilisation are ebbing away as the West spurns its own enlightenment, repudiates its glorious inheritance, and under the impetus of dark and demonic energies (to which it willingly surrenders itself), prepares itself for the last Armageddon - the last battle of rebellious man against the truth of God -

"The kings of the earth have set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his Christ, saying, Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us..." (Psalm 2)

Let those who meddle with prophetic speculation, and entertain the fantasy that there is an "Armageddon" due to be fought in the plains of Esdraelon in the valley of the ancient river of Kishon to the north of Palestine - a battle of guns and bayonets, of Russians, Turks, Arabs and probably Americans and Britons - a battle of nuclear bombs and infernal cavalry mustering 200,000,000 sabres - let them (we say) consider that Armageddon has long since been joined; that the battleground is the human soul, that the weapons of the forces of light and truth are not of earthly manufacture, or material invention, but spiritual, and mighty through God "to the pulling down of strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). Likewise the foe which arrays itself on the hostile side does not consist of hordes of Russians, Chinese, Arabs, or Turks, (however much some of these may be highly significant today in relation to international politics and internal industrial strife) - but the ancient foe against which the Church of God has always been in conflict - "We war not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this

world, against wicked spirit powers in the regions of invisibility" (Ephesians 6:12, see margin).

The weapons of this warfare? No! Not nuclear physics, high explosives, poison gas, and disease germs, but the pollution of the human soul with ancient sin and capital error, against which avails only "the whole armour of God", consisting of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, prayer, and the Word of God.

(see Eph 6:13-18)

In our view, Armageddon is the culminating point of the ages in the perpetual conflict of the forces of light and darkness; truth and error, and the battleground is the human soul where, as in the case of the Son of Man in the temptation in the wilderness and the agony in Gethsemane, the issue is fought out between Almighty God and the ancient Serpent of hell - the conflict which began in Eden, which was exemplified in the patience of Job, in the afflictions of David, in the trials of the Church and which is now culminating in the repudiation of the Christian revelation by the once Christian West, the fall of all standards of righteousness and truth, the pollution of human nature by practices now tolerated by civilised governments, the breakdown of law and order, the powerlessness of organised human society to defend itself against the rising tide of traffic in herbal and chemical stews which destroy the body, mind and soul of addicts and above all the surrender of science, literature and art, education and culture, to the sinister encroachments of a universal atheism. If this is not Armageddon and if this is not of the nature of that "loosing of Satan" foretold in Revelation 20 as the penultimate state of human history, then there is very little meaning left in words.

The terms of the conflict, however, are always the same as was denoted by Christ in the gainsaying of the Jews in the temple precinct at Jerusalem so long ago - "If ye believe not that I AM, ye shall die in your sins". As the flames which engulfed the devoted city in A.D.70 bore historic testimony to the truth of that saying of Christ, so today, the real question is "Who is Christ?" ("Who art thou?" asked the Jews). The answer to that question hangs over our fallen race perpetually. The identity of the Deliverer who was to be the Seed of the Woman (Genesis 3:15), who should, as Man, submit Himself to the entire consequences of man's defeat at the hands of the Prince of Darkness and overcome death by becoming death's victim - the identity of this One, we say, is the real question which all must face.

The contemptuous "Who art thou?" of the temple Jews is the speech of a blind and sinful world which yet cannot avoid the issue of an encounter with its God in the Person of the Eternal and only begotten Son. To recognise the deity of Christ and therefore His unique qualification to be the Deliverer and Redeemer of Man and the Head of a new moral creation established for ever by its unity with the Godhead through the Son - to recognise this, lies at the root of man's salvation, and is the solemn duty laid upon all men everywhere. "If ye believe not that I AM, ye shall die in your sins".

"This is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."(John 17:3)

We now begin to see the sublime answer of Christ in all its mystery and wonder: "Even that which I said unto you from the beginning". Here is to be perceived the fulness of His self-declaration as the Word made flesh, the Word of God who was ever with God and is in fact God -

"I AM THAT WHICH I AM. I AM HE WHO EVER IS: I AM MY OWN SPEECH AND WISDOM. I AM WHAT I SAY EVEN THE ONE WHO IS THE BEGINNING, FROM ALL ETERNITY, THE SAME. I, EVEN I, AM IN FACT THE BEGINNING, THE FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD".

This is the authentic voice which "SAID" from the bush which burned but which was not consumed, - "I AM THAT I AM" (Exodus 3:14). The same all-embracing "SAYING" of God is repeated in almost identical form in Ezekiel 12:25 (I am the Lord. I will speak and THE WORD THAT I SHALL SPEAK shall come to pass"). These capitalised words are remarkable in the Hebrew. We place them here (phonetically expressed in our English alphabetical form) in juxtaposition with the earlier sentence to Moses quoted above, thus -

EZEKIEL 12:12

ADABER ETH ASHER ADABER

(I say that which I say).

EXODUS 3:14

EH'YEH ASBER EY'YEH

(I am (that) which I am)

The words of Christ to the temple Jews in John 8 bear a remarkable correspondence to the Hebrew quotations above, especially that found in Ezekiel and the sentence shows how our Redeemer in all His utterances and acts on earth moved through His own prophetic word spoken "from the beginning" until He fulfilled all things in His Crucifixion - "I am my own speech and wisdom, deriving all things from myself, even as I am the source of all that is, the universal cause, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last".

His threefold "I AM" in our chapter declares His self-conscious deity and compares with the "I am he" of Isaiah's oft-repeated phrase, the "I am that I am" of the Burning Bush, and the "I say that which I say" of Ezekiel 12 (with its solemn association with Israel's rejection by God). His declaration that He is "the same which I said unto you from the beginning" is the culminating point of His identification of Himself with these great prophesies.

CHRIST & EZEKIEL

The 12th chapter of Ezekiel enters prominently into the discourse of the Lord in John 8. Three times in Ezekiel 12 the Lord repeats the phrase - "And they shall know that I am the Lord" (verses 15, 16, and 20). Each time the phrase is uttered as an assurance that God will visit with His terrible judgments the apostasy of Israel, just as in John 8:28 - "When ye have lifted up the Son of Man then shall ye know that I am he". It is of the highest significance that the prophet Ezekiel is addressed throughout as "Son of Man" because in the prophetic spirit it is Christ, the Eternal Word who speaks in Ezekiel. Hence the identity of the expression - "When ye have lifted up the Son of Man...." The words of Christ in the temple are, therefore, the true fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by Nebuchadnezzar was the subject of the prophecy in Ezekiel 12. The final destruction along with the deposition of the Jewish nation from its ancient privileges is the subject of Christ's warning in John 8. The Babylonish destruction in Ezekiel's time was the foreshadowing of that culminating judgment on Israel which ensued upon their rejection and crucifixion of Christ.

THE LIFE HISTORY OF THE DEVIL

The remainder of the Lord's dialogue in the Temple (John 8) contains in the most powerful of language His repudiation of the unbelieving nation. He denies to them their proud boast that they were the children of Abraham. What? And they were seeking to kill Him? This did not Abraham. They only are Abraham's children who do the works of Abraham in faith and repentance. These who sought to slay Him evinced that they were the children of another father - the devil - whose works of murder and lies they were bent upon fulfilling. The life history of Satan is remarkably expressed by Christ in a single sentence. Satan was a murderer 'from the beginning' and. abode not in the truth (v.44). The fall of Satan in heaven was immediate from his creation when the revelation of the truth concerning God and His purpose was unveiled within him.

He hated the truth of his own being as a subordinate to the Creator and a servant of the divine glory. He hated life and murdered life in himself, because the truth required of him that which he would not render. Thereafter hatred of life, and therefore of God, took full possession of him, and he began his career of self-destruction in himself and later in the world of man which culminated in the murder of Him who as God became Man, and thereby, in the mystery and wonder of the divine wisdom Satan destroyed himself though not by intention. Only by death can death be destroyed, and only by One who was both Life and Truth could that death of deaths be enacted and this is the mystery of the Cross, and this is why He who died to purge creation of its curse must Himself be God, the Beginning, the Alpha, the First, the Answer to the lie. He who is the First is also by consequence the Last, and therefore the Destiny, the Triumph, the glory of creation.

Boldly and clearly Christ declares His prerogative as Lord of Death and the Grave as well as Lord of Heaven: "Verily, verily I say unto you, If a man keep my saying he shall never see death" (v.51).

He does not enlighten the wicked upon the enigmatic and spiritual meaning of this statement but meets their scoffing words with a further declaration of His true Godhead, claiming priority over Abraham both in time and in dignity of person:

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day and he saw it and was glad.

For Abraham had met Christ in the theophany of that mysterious Priest-King Melchizedek, who never was born and never had died, of whom Paul wrote that "he liveth" (Heb. 7:8), and therefore was in fact Christ in one of His most important pre-incarnation appearances. Abraham was thus taught to rejoice in this foretaste of the gospel wherein he learned to look ahead to the fulfillment of all things in Christ's eternal day (Heb. 11:13-16).

The incredulity of the Jews, "Thou art not yet fifty years old and hast thou seen Abraham?" is answered by that clearest of all self-declarations of deity -

BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS, I AM.

They took up stones to cast at Him. At last He had spoken out clearly enough even for them. But "Jesus hid Himself" by casting a judicial blindness upon them, "and went out of the Temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by",

Tremble O Israel! There is more in this action than mere escape from premature death. This leaving the temple, and passing by, is prophetic. They are being left to their fate. Mercy, long neglected and truth, long denied, is passing beyond their sight and reach. The impenitent are being left to their fate. The very stones

clutched in their hands to Slay Him are witness against themselves. Soon they will be free to crucify Him, but already it is too late - their holy house, the temple, is left unto them desolate. Had they known the prophecies they had known their Lord, but unrepented sin blinds the understanding and destroys the soul. Theirs is the death; His the life.

* * * * *

ADDENDUM

AUGUSTINE ON JOHN 8 VERSES 21-25

What then of us? shall we venture to say anything on such words, "I am who am;" or rather, on this, that you have heard the Lord saying, "If ye believe not that I am, ye shall die in your sins"? -- Shall I venture with these feeble and scarcely existing powers of mine to discuss the meaning of that which Christ the Lord hath said, "If ye believe not that I am"? I shall venture to ask the Lord Himself. Listen to me as one asking rather than discussing, inquiring rather than assuming, learning rather than teaching, and fail not yourselves also to be asking with me or through me. The Lord Himself, who is everywhere, is also at hand. Let Him hear the feeling that prompts to ask, and grant the fruit of understanding. For in what words, even were it so that I comprehend something, can I convey to your hearts what I comprehend? What voice is adequate? what eloquence sufficient? what powers of intelligence? what faculty of utterance?

I shall speak, then, to our Lord Jesus Christ; I shall speak, and may He be pleased to hear me. I believe He is present, I am fully assured of it for He Himself has said, "Lo, I am with you even to the end of the world," O Lord our God, what is that which Thou saidst, "If ye believe not that I am"? For what is there that belongs not to the things Thou hast made? Does not heaven so belong? Does not the earth? Does not everything in earth and heaven? Does not man himself to whom Thou speakest?

Does not the angel whom Thou sendest? If all these are things made by Thee, what is that existence Thou hast retained as something exclusively Thine own, which Thou hast given to none besides, that Thou mightest be such Thyself alone? For how do I hear "I am who am," as if there were none besides? and how do I hear "If ye believe not that I am"? For had they no existence who heard Him? Yea, though they were sinners, they were men. What then can I do? What that existence is, let Him tell my heart, let Him tell, let Him declare it within; let the inner man hear, the mind apprehend this true existence, for such existence is always unvarying in character.

For a thing, anything whatever (I have begun as it were to dispute, and have left off inquiring. Perhaps I wish to speak what I have heard. May He grant enlargement to my hearing, and to yours, while I speak); - for anything, whatever in short be its excellence, if it is changeable, does not truly exist; for there is no true existence wherever non-existence has also a place. For whatever can be changed, so far as changed, it is not that which was: if it is no longer what it was, a kind of death has therein taken place; something that was there has been eliminated, and exists no more.

Blackness has died out in the silvery locks of the patriarch, comeliness in the body of the careworn and crooked old man, strength in the body of the languishing, the (previous) standing posture in the body of one walking, walking in the body of one standing, walking and standing in the body of one reclining, speech in the tongue of the silent- whatever changes, and is what it was not, I see there a kind of life in that which is, and death in that which was. In fine, when we say of one deceased, where is that person? we are answered, He was.

O Truth, it is thou (alone) that truly art! For in all actions and movements of ours, yea, in every activity of the creature, I find two times, the past and the future. I seek for the present, nothing stands still; what I have said is no longer present what I am going to say is not yet come: what I have done is no longer present: what I am going to do is not yet come: the life I have lived is no longer present; the life I have still to live is not yet come. Past and future I find in every creature-movement: in truth, which is abiding, past and future I find not, but the present alone, and that unchangeably, which has no place in the creature.

Sift the mutations of things, thou wilt find WAS and WILL BE: think on God, thou wilt find the IS, where WAS and WILL BE cannot exist. To be so then thyself, rise beyond the boundaries of time. But who can transcend the powers of his being? May He raise us thither who said to the Father, "I will that they also be with me where I am." And so, in making this promise, that we should not die in our sins, the Lord Jesus Christ, I think, said nothing else by these words, "If ye believe not that I am:' yea, by these words I think He meant nothing else than this, "If ye believe not that I am' God, 'Ye shall die in your sins.'

Well, God be thanked that He said, "If ye believe not," and did not say, if ye comprehend not. For who can comprehend this? Or is it so, since I have ventured to speak and you have seemed to understand, that you have indeed comprehended somewhat of a subject so unspeakable? If then thou comprehendest not, faith sets thee free. Therefore also the Lord said not, if ye comprehend not that I am; but said what they were capable of attaining, "If ye believe not that I am, ye shall die in your sins."

And savouring as these men always did of the earth, and ever hearing and answering according to the flesh, what did they say to Him? "Who art thou?" For when thou saidst, 'If ye believe not that I am,' thou didst not tell us what thou wert. Who art thou, that we may believe? He answered, "The beginning." Here is the existence that (always) is. The beginning cannot be changed: the beginning is self-abiding and all-originating; that is, the beginning, to which it has been said, "But thou Thyself art the same, and Thy years shall not fail." "The beginning," He said, "for so I also speak to you."

Believe me (to be) the beginning, that ye may not die in your sins. For just as if by saying, "Who art thou?" they had said nothing else than this, what shall we believe thee to be? He replied, "The beginning" that is, believe me (to be) the beginning. But His answer had a deeper meaning, when He saw that they had put the question, "Who art thou?" in such a way as to mean, having heard from thee, "If ye believe not that I am," what shall we believe thee to be? To this He replied, "The beginning:" as if He said, believe me to be the beginning. And He added, "For (as such) I also speak to you;" that is, having humbled myself on your account, I have condescended to such words. For if the beginning as it is in itself had remained so with the Father, as not to receive the form of a servant and speak as man with men; how could they have believed in Him, since their weak hearts could not have heard the Word intelligently without some voice that would appeal to their senses? Therefore, said He, believe me to be the beginning; for, that you may believe, I not only am, but also speak to you.

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