

The Flight From Truth

A few years ago, I read a book with the same title as the title of this sermon, *The Flight From Truth*. It was written by a French intellectual Jacques Revel. He wrote the book in 1990, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Revel said he penned the book because he was bewildered to see journalists in the West frequently ignoring obvious facts, undisputed events and known situations. Liberal journalists in the 70s, 80s and early 90s, acted like those countries behind the Iron Curtain and those South American and African countries ruled by communist dictators were real paradises on Earth, wonderful places ruled by benign, kind leaders. These journalists routinely ignored events such as massacres, purges, civil wars, coups, because it didn't match the story they wanted to tell. Revel wrote at the beginning of the book that he wanted to find out “why human beings so frequently neglect the genuine knowledge that is available to them and prefer to base their [ideas] and their actions on false information, even though it is often against their interest to do so.” To put it another way, why do people flee from truth? Why do they knowingly turn away from reality?

Revel's book could have been written yesterday, because that phenomenon has intensified massively in our day. People flee from truth: whether it is economic truth, political truth, moral truth, or religious truth.

Revel was amazed by this phenomenon, and we might still be shocked by the brazenness of some of the lies around us, but actually the Bible explains the phenomenon of fleeing from truth. In fact, we find it within the first few pages of Genesis. Once Adam and Even sinned, the first thing they did was to try to cover up the nakedness that they now saw, and the second thing they did was to try to hide from God when they heard Him in the Garden. Fleeing from truth. So we see the pattern beginning and continuing through Scripture: people either physically fleeing from God and truth, or mentally fleeing with excuses, denials, blaming.

Why don't people want the truth? Jesus told us in this very Gospel we are studying in John 3.

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. (John 3:19–20)

The light of truth exposes you, and if you don't want exposure, if you prefer your evil deeds, then you will flee from truth. And we see this flight throughout the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of John reads like a court case. You have the prosecution, charging Jesus with all kinds of things: blasphemy, deception, Law-Breaking. You have the defence, Jesus explaining where He is from, who sent Him, who authorised Him, and bringing witnesses and evidence that He is who He says He is. He calls to the stand witnesses like John the Baptist, the Old Testament Scriptures, His Father, His miracles. The jury are the people He was speaking to at the time, and we, the readers of John. We must decide if Jesus is really who He says He is.

What we find again in John 7 is a flight from truth. John 7 presents us with four unmistakable truths about Jesus: His origin, His destination, His works, and His words. These four things: where He is from, where He is going, what He did, and what He said really summarise His identity. As they do for any person. We usually ask of someone we are trying to know “Where is he from? What does he do? What does he say?” In the case of Jesus, His origin, destination, works and words, once again provide clear light for those who want to see.

So as we read this, we will see people fleeing from truth, and we should ask ourselves, why are they

doing that? And we will then also have the chance to ask, am I fleeing from this truth, or am I drawing near to it?

I. The Origin of Jesus

²⁵ Now some of them from Jerusalem said, "Is this not He whom they seek to kill? ²⁶ But look! He speaks boldly, and they say nothing to Him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is truly the Christ? ²⁷ However, we know where this Man is from; but when the Christ comes, no one knows where He is from."

Now, to make sense of this dialogue, you have to realise that John is recording different voices in the crowd, and some of them in conflict with each other. One group says, this is truly the Messiah. Why are the religious rulers just letting Him teach in the Temple?

Another group says, no, He isn't, because we already know where He comes from, and when Messiah comes, it will be mysterious – we won't know where and how He comes. This was more confusion and mythology about Messiah. Some believed that because Daniel 7 describes Messiah coming on the clouds with great glory, that when Messiah arrived, it would be sudden, supernatural, with no one knowing His origin.

A few verses later, we find more discussion of His origin, with more misconceptions.

But some said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee? ⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?" ⁴³ So there was a division among the people because of Him.

Now at least this group had a little more knowledge of Scripture. They remembered the prophecy from Micah chapter 5 that said Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, and be from the tribe of Judah. But Jesus, they all thought, was from Galilee. They assumed He had been born in Nazareth. Of course, John is no doubt writing this with some irony, because he knows his readers have read the other Gospels, where Jesus was born in Bethlehem, by the arranged providence of God. He knows his readers have read the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, where Jesus is biologically from the seed of David by Mary, and also legally the heir to the throne through his adopted father, Joseph. But John lets the ignorance of the people be known, without challenging it. Because he who has ears to hear, will hear. He who really seeks the truth of Jesus' origin will find it. And again, there is a flight from truth, people dividing, going towards the truth, or going away from it.

But Jesus did challenge some of this false teaching about himself.

²⁸ Then Jesus cried out, as He taught in the temple, saying, "You both know Me, and you know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know. ²⁹ But I know Him, for I am from Him, and He sent Me." ³⁰ Therefore they sought to take Him; but no one laid a hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come.

Yes, Jesus says, you do know me. You know my name, you know the town in which I lived. But you don't really know my true origin. I am not a normal man from Galilee. I happened to live there but my origin is with the One who sent me – and you do not know Him. I do know Him, because I am His Son – I am from Him, He sent Me. Quite simply, Jesus is saying, my true origin is in Heaven – it is eternal, and with the Father. For the Jewish authorities, this is enough to arrest Him. He is making another claim to be God. But, either through God's providence of circumstances, or through some miraculous restraining power, no one arrested Jesus. His time of trial and crucifixion was still six months away. No one can force God to act sooner or later than He plans to act.

The origin of Jesus is clearly Heavenly, seen in the virgin birth. That Jesus was born of a virgin means He was not merely a man, born naturally of two human parents. One of His parents was divine. The virgin birth is not only recorded in Matthew and Luke, it was predicted in the Old Testament. Isaiah 7:14 predicted that virgin will conceive and bear a son. Genesis 3:15 predicted that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head. The early church confessed the virgin birth in its earliest creeds.

Ironically, it was the descendants of some of the Pharisees who provided us with smoking gun evidence of the virgin birth. In some later Jewish writings, Jesus is said to be the illegitimate son of a wedded woman with a Roman soldier. Question: why would they invent a story about the birth of Jesus, if he was merely the biological son of Joseph? Only if His birth was unusual would there have been any rumour or story about it.

Here is a truth that you can flee from, or flee towards: the Man Jesus of Nazareth had a heavenly origin.

But there was truth not just about where He came from, but also about where He was going. Not only the origin of Jesus, but also

II. The Destination of Jesus

³³ Then Jesus said to them, "I shall be with you a little while longer, and *then* I go to Him who sent Me. ³⁴ You will seek Me and not find Me, and where I am you cannot come." ³⁵ Then the Jews said among themselves, "Where does He intend to go that we shall not find Him? Does He intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? ³⁶ What is this thing that He said, 'You will seek Me and not find Me, and where I am you cannot come'?"

Jesus explains that His mission on Earth is nearly over. He knows it is just six months away, at the next Passover, that He will die, and rise, and then ascend to the Father.

He knows that His enemies will look for His body, and they will not find it. Not only that, but where He is going – to the Father – they cannot come, for two reasons. One, they are still in cursed, human corruptible bodies, and Paul tells us that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Two, some of His audience rejects Jesus as the Word, the Son, the Messiah. And as He will say later in this book, "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6)

Now the response of the Jewish leaders to these words is again complete misunderstanding. They think He means that Jesus is going to leave the country, go to places where there are small Jewish communities outside of Israel, and there teach the Greek-speaking Jews, or even the Gentiles? These religious Jews in Jerusalem wouldn't dare travel into Gentile territory, and they think that's what Jesus means by, "I am going to a place you cannot come".

Ironically, Jesus' enemies did search for Him after His death. They searched for His body at the tomb. They couldn't find it, so they paid the guards to come up with a story about the disciples having stole the body. If they could have found the body of Jesus, they could have paraded it up and down Jerusalem, and ended Christianity in one afternoon.

Furthermore, if Jesus was somehow alive after the cross, maybe He only swooned and fainted on the cross, and then revived in the tomb, escaped, frightened off hardened Roman legionnaires and convinced the disciples that His mangled body had actually been raised from the dead, well, He'd still need to go and live somewhere. And even if He had gone to another country, some word, some record, something would have survived to tell us that Jesus of Nazareth finished His days in Greece, or Italy, or India, or Britain. But there is none. And there is no burial plot with His name on it.

Where did He go?

The destination of Jesus appears to have been what He said to Mary at the Tomb: “¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’ ” (John 20:17)

We can flee from that truth, and try to find alternative explanations for what happened to Jesus of Nazareth, or we can flee towards the truth.

His origin and His destination tell us much about Jesus. The third truth about Jesus has to do with His works.

III. The Works of Jesus

³¹ And many of the people believed in Him, and said, “When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this *Man* has done?” ³² The Pharisees heard the crowd murmuring these things concerning Him, and the Pharisees and the chief priests sent officers to take Him.

By this late stage in Jesus' ministry, the sheer amount and kind of miracles is staggering. He has healed every conceivable condition, including conditions people were born with: born blind, deaf, lame, deformed. He has touched the untouchable and healed them – lepers. He has cast out demons that were impossible to exorcise for anyone else. He has exercised power over creation itself, calming storms, walking on water. He has been able to create bread and fish and feed thousands of people. He could direct hundreds of fish into Peter's net. He has even raised from the dead a widow's son, and the daughter of Jairus, a synagogue ruler.

Putting the Gospel accounts together, we have 35 recorded miracles. But John tells us at the end of his book that “²⁵ And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen. (John 21:25)

In other words, the miraculous was so abundant in the ministry of Jesus, that the Gospel writers have obviously just sampled a few to make a theological point.

So the people ask the obvious question. If Jesus of Nazareth is not the Messiah, and Messiah is still coming, will He do even more miracles than Jesus? Surely not. In which case, Jesus is the best candidate for Messiah. And once the Pharisees and priests hear the crowd reasoning like this, they send the Temple police to fetch Him, although unsuccessfully.

But Jesus has something to say about His own works.

³⁷ On the last day, that great *day* of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. ³⁸ He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” ³⁹ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified. ⁴⁰ Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, “Truly this is the Prophet.” ⁴¹ Others said, “This is the Christ.”

This is the Feast of Tabernacles, where Israel would gather in Jerusalem, and build booths to dwell in, reminding them that they were tent dwellers during the Exodus, reminding them of their heavenly home with God, and even pointing to the fact that one day God would Tabernacle among them.

The feast went on for seven days. But on the last day, there was a special ritual that took place.

People carried in their right hand the lulav - of a myrtle and willowbranch tied together with a palm-branch between them. In their left hands, they had the etrog, citrus fruit. One group of people went to the Temple, a second group cut down palm branches and covered the altar with them. A third group followed the priest down to the Pool of Siloam. Carrying a golden pitcher, he filled it with water. To the sound of music and singing, he returned with the crowd to the Temple, passing through the water gate. Another priest came with the drink offering of wine, and the two of them then poured their wine and water onto the altar on opposite sides to the sound of singing of Psalm 118, “24 This is the day the Lord has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it. 25 Save now, I pray, O Lord; O Lord, I pray, send now prosperity. (Psalm 118:24–25)

Now, it was certainly at this point that Jesus said to the crowd, come to me for a kind of self-replenishing water. What is that water? It is the water of salvation, or new life in Christ.

Jesus' greatest miracle of all is the work of salvation. He died on the cross for our sins, rose again, and ascended to heaven. If one believes in Him, He grants a new nature within, with the Holy Spirit indwelling. At this time, believers were not yet indwelt by the Spirit, which is why Jesus will say to His disciples, “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. (John 16:7)

Some fled from this truth, and thought Jesus was the Prophet, someone less than Messiah. Others went towards Jesus and believed He was the Christ.

Here again, people can flee from the truth, or come to it. Some of the early Jewish writers could not deny that Jesus did great works, so they attributed it to magic, dark arts, or demon-possession. Some today still claim that Jesus cut Himself and hid the name of God under His skin to enable Him to do miracles. But what does that flight from the truth show? It shows that the works of Jesus were real, powerful, and undeniable. You either flee from the truth about the works of Jesus, or you accept His invitation to come to Him and drink.

His origin tells us who He is. His destination tells us who He is. His works tell us who He is. But a fourth shining light of truth are

IV. The Words of Jesus

⁴⁴ Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him. ⁴⁵ Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why have you not brought Him?” ⁴⁶ The officers answered, “No man ever spoke like this Man!”

This is an amazing and amusing scene. The Temple had its own guards, armed officers there to deal with any trouble, riot, fights, or disorder. They were there to enforce law and order in the Temple precincts. Now the Pharisees and Sadducees had sent these Temple police to take Jesus by the arm and stop His public preaching.

But apparently, when these guards got there, they began listening to Jesus preach. And as they listened to Him, His words were so compelling, so powerful, so authoritative, that they forgot that they were supposed to arrest Him, and just stood there listening to Him. And none of them wanted to interrupt His sermon, so they let Him go on and finish. And eventually, they came back to the religious rulers empty-handed. When those rulers demanded, “Why haven't you brought Him?”, the response of the Temple police is one of the greatest lines in all of Scripture. “No man ever spoke like this man! We've heard a lot of rabbis preach in these grounds, and we've heard a lot of rabbis in our time, but this man's words are unique. He is extraordinary. His words are piercing truth. We

didn't and we couldn't stop that kind of teaching.”

You can almost picture the fury and the choking responses of the Pharisees:

⁴⁷ Then the Pharisees answered them, “Are you also deceived? ⁴⁸ Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? ⁴⁹ But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.”

In other words, “Has He also got you under His spell? Have any of us, the true religious authorities, the infallible filters of truth and error, have any of us believed Him? No! What does that tell you!” Here you can tell their arrogant contempt for the average man, thinking them too foolish and simple to discern right from wrong.

At this, the one possible Jesus-disciple among the pharisees, Nicodemus pipes up.

⁵⁰ Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, ⁵¹ “Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?” ⁵² They answered and said to him, “Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.” ⁵³ And everyone went to his *own* house. (John 7:25–53)

He asks the simple question, how can we have decided Jesus is guilty, if we haven't given Him a fair trial? Their answer is another insult. Are you from Galilee – is Jesus your hometown hero? Are you also a country bumpkin, a rural rube with no discernment? Are there any Scriptures which say a prophet comes from Galilee? It's an open and shut case. Jesus is an imposter.

In spite of the fact that the words of Jesus are stopping soldiers in their tracks, these men flee from the truth. But all of us know that the words of Jesus are greatest ever spoken. When we read His words quoted in the Gospels, we know that no human author could have invented these words, or else he would have been a figure as great and as well known as Jesus.

Bernard Ramm in *Protestant Christian Evidences* writes: Statistically speaking, the Gospels are the greatest literature ever written. They are read by more people, quoted by more authors, translated into more tongues, represented in more art, set to more music, than any other book or books written by any man in any century in any land.

"But the words of Christ are not great on the grounds that they have such a statistical edge – they are quoted more, read more because they deal clearly and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast: namely, Who is God? Does He love me? What should I do to please Him? How does He look at my sin? How can I be forgiven?"

W. S. Peake: "How was it that a carpenter of no special training, ignorant of the culture and learning of the Greeks, born of a people whose great teachers were often narrow, sour, intolerant legalists, was the supreme religious Teacher the world has known?"

We can flee from the truth of His words, or we can agree with the Temple police, and say, “No man ever spoke like this man”.

His origin, His destination, His works, and His words are all light that show us who He is.

But why did God not make it so obvious that no one could flee from the truth? Why didn't God write His name in the stars every night? Why didn't He make every human being born with a tiny tattoo that says, “made with love by the God of Israel”.

Another French philosopher gives us a great answer. Blaise Pascal said this: “God has willed to make himself quite recognizable by those who should sincerely seek Him, and thus, willing to

appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart. He so regulates the knowledge of Himself that He has given signs of Himself, visible to those who seek Him, and not to those who seek Him not. There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary attitude.”