

THE CROSS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

The signs section of John's Gospel (John 1–12, 19–20) encompasses about two thirds of the book. The prominence of this section shows that John's overriding purpose is to explain, through the signs, how the readers can obtain eternal life (John 20:31). Therefore, it is not surprising that he has many nutshell statements on how to pass *from death to life*. What may surprise us is the strange absence of Christ's cross and resurrection from John's message-in-a-nutshell verses for unbelievers.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:36).

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life (John 5:24).

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life (John 6:47).

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 (John 20:30-31).

¹ The author presented a paper under this same title at the Grace Evangelical Society Conference in Irving, TX, on March 12, 2003. It is a revision of his article, "The Message of Life in the Gospel of John," *CTS Journal* 7 (July–September 2001): 2-20 (available online at www.chafer.edu). The impetus for relating the cross to John's message arose in teaching the book in 2000 and early 2001 at Chafer Theological Seminary and at Grace Chapel of Orange, CA.

II. THREE PROPOSALS IN RESPONSE TO THE ABSENCE OF THE CROSS IN EVANGELISTIC PASSAGES IN JOHN

The author has heard three proposals from Christians who reflect upon the absence of the cross and resurrection in these verses. Each proposal creates its own difficulties. (This article will present a fourth option that avoids these pitfalls.²)

A. THE ARGUMENT THAT THE PRE-CROSS MESSAGE IS IRRELEVANT TODAY

Some who hold that believing in Jesus' death and resurrection is a prerequisite to gaining eternal life say that the pre-cross message as found in John doesn't apply today since we live after the cross. New revelation has made additional content an essential part of the saving message for us.

They point out that each example in John where the cross is absent precedes the cross. Thus, they conclude that verses like John 3:16; 5:24; and 6:47 could not possibly say anything about the apostles' post-cross message for unbelievers.

This statement contains its own refutation. John 20:30-31 does not adjust the message of John 3:16, 36; 5:24; and 6:47. Thus, John's statements of what the unbeliever must believe was the same during Christ's ministry as it was after the cross and resurrection. John wrote his entire book after the cross. If the message changed, but John did not tell his readers, he would be misleading (at best) or deceptive (at worst). Thus, we should reject this proposal and look for another solution.

B. THE DEBATER'S PLOY

Some use the technique commonly found in debates. They ask a withering rhetorical question: "You don't mean that John de-emphasizes the cross, do you?" They then follow with: "This doesn't mean that we should de-emphasize the cross, does it?"

This proposal is a reversal of the first. It assumes that the non-mention of the cross in John 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:47; and 20:30-31 would mean that the cross has little or no relevance in John's message for the unbeliever. The present author categorically rejects the idea that John minimizes the cross. A paraphrase of John's salvific message indicates

² Cf. especially pp. 25-26 in this article. Pages 18-26 make a case for the approach accepted by this author.

this: *I am to believe that—through His cross and resurrection—Jesus Christ, God's Son, gives me eternal life and resurrection, removing the death sentence that I deserve as a sinner.* The cross and resurrection have a vital role in John's Gospel and in our message to the unbeliever. We need to discover how John relates the cross to his message for the unbeliever.

C. THE "LET'S IMPROVISE" APPROACH

A popular response is to plead ignorance as to why the Lord Jesus didn't mention the cross in some evangelistic encounters. Since Paul in his epistles makes it clear that today's gospel centers on the cross, we should just add the cross. Why limit ourselves to passages in John?

This proposal has good intentions, but rushes forward before discovering how John relates the cross to his message. Unfortunately, as we all know, many people compromise grace in John's message for unbelievers by inserting repentance, even though John's Gospel avoids the word.³ Well-intentioned people have erred by adding what they assume that John neglected. Let us not rush into a solution, but examine how John relates the cross to his message for the unbeliever (a fourth proposal).

III. FINDING THE ANSWER THROUGH THE PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose statement in John 20:30-31 defines John's message of life:

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 (John 20:30-31).

Immediately, a question arises: Why does John say *other signs*? His most recent use of the word *sign* is in chapter 12, but this is now the end of chapter 20.⁴ Why is it that John speaks of *other signs*, despite the long gap since last using the word?

³ Since John uses the term *repentance* often in the Book of Revelation, it is appropriate to say that he *avoids* the word in his Gospel and his Epistles.

⁴ *Sēmeion* ("sign") is in John 2:11, 18, 23; 3:2; 4:48, 54; 6:2, 14, 26, 30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 20:30.

A. THE SEVEN RECOGNIZED SIGNS

Let us begin by noting that most expositors recognize seven signs:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Turning water into wine | 2:1-12 |
| 2. Healing a nobleman's son from afar | 4:46-54 |
| 3. Healing at Bethsaida | 5:1-15 |
| 4. Feeding the 5000 | 6:1-14 |
| 5. Walking on the water | 6:15-21 |
| 6. Healing a man born blind | 9:1-7 |
| 7. Raising Lazarus | 11:1-44 |

Although these seven are the recognized signs, John points to an eighth.

B. DISCOVERING AND DEFINING THE EIGHTH SIGN

When the Temple authorities demand a sign validating Christ's right to cleanse the Temple, He identifies that sign (John 2:18-22). The present author has long recognized an eighth sign. However, prior to 2000, he restricted it to Jesus' resurrection. But Jesus did not define the sign that narrowly. Verse 21 defines Temple [*naos*] as Jesus' body, so the eighth sign clearly includes His resurrection:

So the Jews [Judeans] answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple [*naos*], and in three days I will raise it up." Then the Jews [Judeans] said, "It has taken forty-six years⁵ to build this temple [*naos*], and will You raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple [*naos*] of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said (John 2:18-22).

The eighth sign includes the resurrection, but does Jesus say more? To limit the eighth sign to the resurrection reads vv. 18-19 as follows:

So the Jews [Judeans] answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?" Jesus an-

⁵ Many translations see these words referring to ongoing construction of the Temple. However, *naos* speaks of the holy place and the holy of holies, not the entire Temple precinct. The *naos* was built forty-six years before John 2 (Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, xv. 11. 6).

swered and said to them, "...in three days I will raise it [this temple] up."

However, Jesus did not merely mention His resurrection. Verse 19 also refers directly to the crucifixion:

Jesus answered and said to them [*concerning the sign*], "Destroy this temple [*naos*], and in three days I will raise it up."

Someone may object, "The crucifixion cannot be part of the eighth sign, because His audience did not regard the destruction of the Temple as miraculous. They only viewed raising up the Temple in three days as a miracle."

The problem with limiting the eighth sign to what the Judeans perceived should be self-evident. They did not understand the reference to the crucifixion, so why should their limitation of the miracle to raising the Temple in three days be definitive?

The Judeans were quite aware of the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem. In that light, they would not regard a destruction of Herod's Temple as impossible (however unlikely it might seem). They only regarded a three-day reconstruction as impossible. Therefore, they construed Jesus' words about destruction of the Temple as idle speculation about the future. However, when Titus actually destroyed the whole Temple in A.D. 70, the hand of God's judgment upon the nation became undeniable. In other words, Jesus and His listeners would regard the destruction of the Temple as a sign from God, but His hearers did not yet realize what Christ says of Himself in Matt 12:6:

Yet I say to you that in this place there is One [Christ] greater than the temple.

Yes, it is true that the A.D. 70 destruction signaled God's judgment upon the nation for rejecting their Messiah. It is also true that the crucifixion of the Messiah was part of the sign authorizing the cleansing of the Temple in John 2. However, the idea that killing Jesus could possibly relate to a sign from God never occurred to them. Thus Paul writes:

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor 2:7-8).

What is fascinating in John 2:19 is the imperative, *Destroy this temple*. Ultimately, it was not a foreign power that would *destroy this temple*

(kill Jesus): The Judean leaders themselves delivered Jesus up to the Romans and insisted on crucifixion. The very fact that the crucifixion occurred was indeed a great miracle. Neither the religious leaders nor Satan sought to validate Jesus as the Christ through a sign, but unwittingly played their roles leading to the fulfillment of the cross/resurrection sign. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was a sign that verified Jesus' right to cleanse the Temple. However, recognition of it as a sign came only after the resurrection.

After Christ's resurrection, John and the other disciples recognized that the cross and resurrection constitute a single sign. Therefore he writes:

Jesus answered and said to them [regarding the sign that He would show them that authorized Him to cleanse the temple], "Destroy this temple [*naos*], and in three days I will raise it up."...Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said *this* to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said (John 2:19, 22).

C. JOHN 19–20 SHOWS THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION ARE A SIGN

Verses in John 19–20 speak of the cross and resurrection fulfilling various Scriptures (John 19:24, 28, 36-37; 20:9). (This hints at the cross and resurrection being a sign.) John 20:6-8 describe Peter and John arriving at the tomb. When John saw the things described in v. 7, he believed that the crucified Christ had risen from the dead.⁶ The context of John 19–20 may well explain why John 20:30 uses the phrase *many other signs*, despite not using the word *sign* since chapter 12.

What John is saying is that any one of the signs is sufficient to cause someone to believe the message through which Christ gives life. However, let us ask, "Which sign did John place right before the purpose statement?" That sign was the cross and resurrection. It was the greatest

⁶ John was already a believer, so he already possessed eternal life. John 13:10-11 shows that Judas was the only unbeliever among the twelve. John 15:3 confirms that the eleven had already believed the message of life. It is quite conceivable that John was an unnamed disciple of John mentioned in John 1:35. If so, he was already a believer in John 1. Also, John 13:10-11 and 15:3 show that Thomas was *already clean* before he believed the Christ's crucifixion culminated in His resurrection in John 20:28-29 (the eighth sign).

of all the signs in a number of ways. The other signs show that He is the Christ, the Son of God, who gives eternal life to everyone who believes Him for it. However, the cross and resurrection demonstrate how He *fulfills* the promise to give eternal life to believers. Despite His crucifixion, He lives eternally. Despite His crucifixion, He is resurrected. Those who believe in Him share that eternal life and the certainty of future resurrection. Does John deemphasize the cross? The answer is a definite “No.” Consider how he connects the cross to his message.

D. EACH OF THE EIGHT SIGNS IS SUFFICIENT

Each of the eight signs is sufficient to persuade a person that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*. John 20:31 shows that whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, has eternal life. Thus, it is imperative that we know what the expression, *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, means in John’s Gospel.

IV. DEFINING WHAT “JESUS IS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD” MEANS

Clearly the passage does not mean that everyone who believes that “Jesus is His first name and Christ is His last name” possesses eternal life. John defines these terms in John 11:25-27, the only other place in John’s Gospel where the expression “the Christ, the Son of God” occurs.

A. THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Jesus asserts that He is *the resurrection and the life*. Then He defines what He means. The following chart shows how these verses relate to both truths.

| Christ is the Resurrector | and | Christ is the Guarantor of Life |
|---|-----|--|
| I am the resurrection (25a) | and | [I am] the life (25b) |
| He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live (25c) | and | whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die (26a) |
| Do you believe [all of] this (26b)? | | |

The neuter form of the word *this* in 26b shows that Jesus did not just ask if she believed that He is *the resurrection* or just whether she believed that He is *the life*. Rather, He asked if she believed that He is both the resurrector and the life-giver.

Verse 25c explains what Jesus means by saying that He is *the resurrection*: He will resurrect all who believe in Him, even though they may die physically. Verse 26a explains what He means by saying that He is *the life*: He grants eternal life to everyone who believes in Him. Martha affirms that she has already believed these truths [Greek perfect tense].

B. JESUS IS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD

It is fascinating to see how v. 27 moves from a simple “Yes/No” answer to an essay answer: Yes, *Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come [or comes] into the world*. Another way of expressing this is, “Of course I believe that You will resurrect all believers and that You grant eternal life to all believers, because I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who comes into the world.”

Her logic matches that of Paul in Acts 26:6-8. How could the patriarchs (including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) enjoy the land God gave to them and to their seed forever (Gen 13:15; 17:8; 26:3; and 35:12) in Christ’s millennial kingdom? Living forever in resurrection bodies is a prerequisite to enjoying the land forever. Martha knows that now deceased saints will be in the Messiah’s kingdom, so obviously the Messiah will resurrect them and give them eternal life. Apart from resurrection and eternal life, no one could be in His millennial kingdom (cf. John 3:3).

Summary: Believing what John means by *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, entails believing that He gives me eternal life. If I have *never* known that faith alone in Jesus Christ alone gave me eternal life, then I *have not yet believed* in Him. If I have *ever* known that faith alone in Jesus Christ alone gave me eternal life, then I *have believed* in Him.

C. THE PURPOSE STATEMENT

It is not accidental that John includes Martha’s statement about believing that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*. His purpose statement indicates that this is sufficient content to give a believer eternal life:

these [the eight signs] are written that you may believe that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, and that [by] believing [this] you may have life in His name (John 20:31).

V. HOW DOES THE CROSS RELATE TO THE MESSAGE OF LIFE?

A. THE GOD OF THE LIVING

Before answering this question directly, it is useful to consider whether the cross and resurrection are the means for Christ granting eternal life. Consider part of Jesus' response to the Sadducees' attempt to ridicule the resurrection. They raised the case of the childless levirate marriages of seven brothers to one woman. He says:

But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Matt 22:31-32).

Note that vv. 31-32 focus on eternal life, not on resurrection. The point seems to be that the Sadducees not only denied resurrection, but they also denied eternal life. These two verses demonstrate that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all possessed eternal life long before the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. We should conclude: The cross did not need to occur prior to God granting eternal life to believers. However, the cross and resurrection did need to occur before God could give a resurrection body to a believer. Briefly, Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:20). A judgment of sin (personal, imputed, the sin nature, etc.) would also seem to be prerequisite to receiving a resurrection body.

B. HOW JOHN RELATES THE CROSS TO THE MESSAGE

John focuses on the reception of eternal life. Everyone who believes that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God* (in the Johannine sense as the resurrector and guarantor of eternal life) receives eternal life from Him. John 11:25-27 indicates that Christ also promises to resurrect all who believe in Him. The fact that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob possessed eternal life since the days of Genesis proves that the cross and resurrection did not need to occur prior to the granting of eternal life. In light of this, John sees Christ's cross and resurrection as the greatest of all signs. Since the cross is what enables the granting of a resurrection body, it is vitally important in John.

...these [the cross-resurrection sign and the other seven signs] are written that you may believe that *Jesus is the Christ, the*

Son of God, and that [by] believing [this] you may have life in His name (John 20:31).

VI. WHAT ABOUT FIRST CORINTHIANS 15?

Evangelicals often make believing the cross and resurrection their bottom-line for unbelievers to gain eternal life. We often define the gospel in terms of Christ's crucifixion, burial, and resurrection,⁷ seeking to echo 1 Cor 15:3-8:

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

Is the mere fact that God's Son died a horrible death on the cross good news for us? Is the fact that He was raised good news for us? These facts become good news for us for only one reason: They affect the destiny of believers. God uses the crucifixion and resurrection to enable believers to escape the Lake of Fire and to be with Him forever. We cannot limit our definition of the gospel to vv. 3-8, because what precedes these verses is what makes His death and resurrection good news for Christians.

Therefore, let us not miss an important feature of vv. 1-2 where Paul demonstrates that what happened to Christ is indeed good news to us. He declares:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you *the gospel* which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, *by which also you are saved*, if you hold fast⁸ that word

⁷ Paul focuses on two items: Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. He does not set forth burial as another item for belief, but as a proof of Christ's death. He gives two lines of evidence for the crucifixion: the OT Scriptures and the fact that He was buried. He also has two proofs of the resurrection: the OT Scriptures and the many witnesses who saw Him.

⁸ The word translated *hold fast* is *katechō* ("to grasp"). Here, it is equivalent to *believe*. Grasping the truth that Jesus Christ gives me eternal life and removes my death sentence is to believe it. In effect, Paul says that his Gospel saves

which I preached to you—unless you believed in [something] vain.⁹

We must always remember that vv. 1-2 show why this is good news for believers: *the gospel...by which also you are saved*. Specifically, Paul says that the gospel gives salvation to the believer. In other words, God gives life to everyone who believes in Jesus for that free gift. The gospel is not merely that Christ was crucified and resurrected. First Corinthians 15:1-8 is good news for us precisely because Christ saves believers through His death and resurrection.

When Paul spoke with the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:31, he told him simply: *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved*. No one would ever accuse Paul of minimizing the cross and resurrection, but the bottom line of his gospel was that Jesus saves from eternal condemnation all who simply believe in Him. John would express the same point in terms of receiving eternal life (John 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:47; and 20:30-31).

VII. HOW DOES THE CROSS RELATE TO THE MESSAGE FOR THE UNBELIEVER?

The bottom line is to believe that Jesus grants eternal life to everyone who simply believes Him for that gift. When I am persuaded that simply by faith in Him the Lord Jesus has taken away my death sentence and granted me eternal life, I receive eternal life as a gift. Faith alone in Jesus Christ alone through grace alone gives me eternal life and the promise that He will resurrect me.

The way that the cross fits into this is that John sees it as the greatest of all of Christ's signs and as the one which enables Him to resurrect

people, if they believe (grasp) it. Paul calls these Corinthians *brethren* in v. 1 and his first class condition raises no doubts about them being believers.

⁹ The word translated *in vain* is a dative. The dative is the normal case for the direct object of *pisteuō* (e.g., *to believe in something vain*). Others take this as an adverbial dative (e.g., *to believe in a vain way*). In response, the direct object view fits normal grammatical usage. In addition, 1 Cor 15:14 shows that Paul's focus is on the truthfulness of Christ's resurrection: *And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty*. In this light, vv. 1-2 teach that believing the gospel message saved the Corinthians, unless what they believed were a false message from Paul. Paul preached a true message to them which they believed. Paul does not want them to abandon that true message.

believers. Let us not forget that John 20:30 assumes that the reader understands the cross and resurrection of Christ as a sign. That is sufficient to account for why John says *many other signs*, not just “many signs.”

My paraphrase of John’s message to the unbeliever follows: I am to believe that—through His cross and resurrection—Jesus Christ, God’s Son, gives me eternal life and resurrection, removing the death sentence that I deserve as a sinner. John sees the cross and resurrection as a reason that people should believe that Jesus Christ gives believers eternal life.

A friend of mine has asked many unchurched unbelievers, “Who was crucified and resurrected on the third day?” Hardly anyone responds, “I have no idea.” They almost always say, “Jesus Christ.” However, most are clueless when asked, “Does God give eternal life as a free gift?” Why not present the cross and resurrection as the reason for believing that Christ will give them eternal life as a gift the moment they believe this? Let us share the good news that Jesus Christ gives eternal life.