

THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS CHRIST
IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Most commentators understand John 20:30-31 as the purpose statement for John:¹ “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).”² Some regard the book as strictly evangelistic; others distinguish both an evangelistic priority as well as a sanctification emphasis (experiencing eternal life).³ Chapters 1—12 in particular have a strong, yet not exclusive, evangelistic thrust. John used the word “believe” (πιστεύω) 98 times in his Gospel; 76 of those occur in chapters 1—12.⁴

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¹ Understanding John 20:30-31 as the purpose statement includes free grace advocates as well as those who do not hold to a free grace view. Leon Morris, as an example of the latter, listed six other proposed purposes for John as found in the literature, and concluded by saying of John 20:31, “John says plainly that he is out to show Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God . . . that he may bring them [John’s readers] to a place of faith and accordingly a new life in Christ’s name” (*The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 34). See also, J. Carl Laney, *John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992) 19; and, Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 24-25.

² All Scripture texts from *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

³ Robert N. Wilkin holds a strictly evangelistic view: “The Fourth Gospel is the only book in the Bible written to unbelievers. It is written to tell unbelievers what they must do to have eternal life (John 20:30-31). . . . However, some suggest that John’s purpose is not *solely* evangelistic. Such a view, they say, would fail to take into account why John included the Upper Room Discourse. However, The [*sic*] final discourse is a magnificent presentation of Jesus as He knowingly approaches His own death. Surely any unbeliever reading this would be amazed at the way this Man lived His last day” (“The Gospel According to John,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin [Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010] 357).

Derickson and Radmacher do not deny the evangelistic emphasis, but see a “sanctification salvation” emphasis as well. “The development of the gospel message within the Gospel, though helpful for the unbeliever seeking Christ, is directed to believers to enable them to *understand* their faith and its implications, giving them assurance and enabling them to walk by faith. . . . John recorded Jesus’ deeds and teachings in order to explain more fully to his readers what it means to receive *and* experience eternal life. . . . This is not to say that the ‘how to’ aspects of regeneration are not addressed in the Gospel. They are almost one hundred times! But Jesus and John also address another dimension, It is not just what you receive that they dwell on, but what you experience as a result of your faith” (Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* [Salem, OR: Charis Press, 2001] 25-26).

Morris and Laney see the book as strictly evangelistic (Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 34; Laney, *John*, 19). Milne sees it primarily as evangelistic, but with other secondary purposes as well. In particular, he indicated that the Upper Room Discourse contains “teaching for the disciple” (Milne, *Message of John*, 24-25). The present writer once held the “solely evangelistic” position; however, after further study, his conviction now is that the book has a strong sanctification thrust in addition to an evangelistic thrust, “not just explaining *how* to get the life, but *what* it was that they were receiving, the nature and experience of eternal life” (Derickson and Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker*, 15).

⁴ Of the other 22 uses, twelve occur in the Upper Room discourse and three in Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer” in John 17; it appears once in 19:35, and six times in John 20 following the Lord’s resurrection. Four of these six occur in Jesus’ conversation with Thomas and the final two appear in 20:31.

In a sense, the Gospel of John has become a “lightening rod” regarding the saving message.⁵ Some take the view that, since John did not address the death and resurrection of Jesus when he recorded the “believe in me” passages, knowledge of or belief in the work of Christ is not necessary for someone to receive eternal life (i.e. to be “born again”). Some take the view that, rather than worrying about the “minimum” content of the gospel, the believer should present as much as possible about the Lord so that those who respond are believing in the biblical Jesus. One such advocate said that the “minimal” gospel only works in a Western culture already somewhat familiar with Jesus. Other cultures require more content to differentiate Jesus from the false ideas of who He is or from putting him on equal footing with the false gods of their culture. Some also take issue with the idea that John is the only book defining the saving message.⁶ What role, if any, do John’s words about the person and work of Jesus Christ play in defining Him as the object of faith?

APPROACH

Most courses in hermeneutics teach at least three primary steps in understanding the text: observation, interpretation, and application. Observation simply means looking carefully at the text to see what is there without actually interpreting the text. Interpretation seeks to understand the meaning of the text, and application seeks to correctly transport the interpretation of the text into the reader’s life.

In wrestling with the question “Where does the person and work of Jesus fit in John’s gospel?,” this study focused primarily upon the first step: observation. As much as possible, this writer read the text as if he had never read it previously. The intent was to read the book in its entirety each time it was read, much as the original audience would have heard it (or read it) in its entirety. They did not have chapter and verse demarcations as the Bible now has. What follows flows from observations made while reading John, with explanatory notes added where needed.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Assuming that John 20:30-31 is, in fact, an overall outline of John’s purposes and that at least chapters 1—12 of the book were written with unbelievers in mind (although not exclusively so), three options arise regarding how a receptive unbeliever might respond to the book, based upon what that unbeliever already knew about Jesus.

- 1) Some unbelievers might know nothing of Jesus, his life, or his death. That person is confronted immediately with statements about Jesus that would force him to wonder about who Jesus really is and what He did. Reading more would lead to allusions of events

⁵ Some differentiate between the gospel and the saving message. Therefore, in deference to that segment of people who make this distinction, the phrase “saving message” is used throughout this article, although this writer would not distinguish the two.

⁶ Some free grace advocates emphasize that, since John is the only book expressly written to unbelievers, the saving message flows exclusively from John. However, even though John is a *primary* book with a message for unbelievers, it is not the *only* book that delineates that salvation comes by faith alone in Christ alone. Romans and Galatians in particular clearly teach that one is justified by faith in Christ. Other books address it as well.

that would make no sense without some basic understanding of biblical history and the story of Jesus. Most of the solutions to these unknowns come to the reader when he reaches the culmination of the story: Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

- 2) Some unbelievers might know some (or much) of Jesus, his life, and his death. For this reader, the allusions are clearer, but the answer to why these events matter comes to the reader when he reaches the culmination of the story: Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.
- 3) A Jewish unbeliever reading the book would likely catch many of the Old Testament references and allusions but not necessarily understand the significance of them as they pertain to Jesus.

In all three situations, John, as a master storyteller, leads the reader to the conclusion that the one who gives eternal life is the Jesus who died and was raised from the dead. Passages addressing the works and the unique identity of Jesus are interwoven throughout the story. Therefore, the flow of the story leads the reader to the historical fact of his death and resurrection. How any reader integrates this into his or her saving message depends upon his or her process of interpretation and synthesis.

EXAMPLES

The research herein is not exhaustive; it does not address every passage in John that speaks to Jesus' work or identity. For example, it will not list every "I am" passage, nor will it list every miracle/sign performed by Jesus, although all these point to his unique identity. Enough passages are addressed to show that John integrated statements about Jesus and his work throughout his book. Those passages can refer to the unique identity of Jesus, to his death, to his resurrection, and/or to his ascension. The following examples are marked accordingly and are listed sequentially as they appear in John.

John 1:1–5 – Identity

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Here the reader is introduced to "the Word" (λόγος, *logos*), without identifying this Word (He is later identified as Jesus, but the words "Jesus" or "Christ" do not appear until 1:17). A Greek reader may well recognize the importance of this word, but John's context defines *logos* differently than does Greek philosophy. The Johannine "Word" is identified as God, is said to be "with" God, and is said to be the creator of all things. Therefore, the reader is immediately confronted with the deity of the Word, later identified as Jesus. In addition, the text says (without explanation) that in Him was life, that He is the light of men, and that the "darkness" did not comprehend the light. The reader is introduced to Jesus in the first five verses, including significant content about his unique identity.

John 1:12 - Identity

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

John here used the first of his thirty-four uses of the verb πιστεύω (in various forms) plus εἰς (*pisteuō eis*, “believe in”), only three of which occur after John 12. Outside Johannine writings, this combination appears only six other times. The object of faith here is “His name.”⁷ Any first-century reader would intuitively know that “names were given in order to express something about a person, or to express something through him,”⁸ often revealing something of the nature of the one named.

In the ancient world, a name was not merely a label but was virtually equivalent to whoever or whatever bore it. . . . Belief in Jesus’ name is the same as believing in Jesus himself, as John 3:18 demonstrates. Prayer in Jesus’ name, therefore, is not a mystical formula but is praying in accord with Jesus’ character, his mind, his purpose.⁹

In a similar way, the phrase “believe in His name” implies some awareness of the unique identity of the one in whom belief is placed.

John 1:14 - Identity

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

In this brief statement of the incarnation, John told the reader that the glory manifested in Jesus was the result of his unique relationship with the Father, as “the only begotten from the Father.” “Only begotten” emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus, particularly as Son.

In Jn. [*sic*] the Lord is always the Son. Because He alone was God’s Son before the foundation of the world, because the whole love of the Father is for Him alone, because He alone is one with God, because the title God may be ascribed to Him alone, He is the only-begotten Son of God.¹⁰

⁷ The phrase “believe in His name” is used in John 1:12, 2:23, and 3:18. John 20:31 uses the phrase “and that believing you may have life in His name.”

⁸ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001) 934–35.

⁹ Ronald Youngblood, “Names in Bible Times, Significance of” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 812.

¹⁰ Friedrich Büchsel, “μονογενής” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., eds. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 4:741. The word, translated “only begotten,” is used eight times in the New Testament. Luke used the term three times, all speaking of an only child (Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38). The writer of Hebrews said Isaac was Abraham’s “only begotten son” (Heb 11:17). Since Isaac was clearly not the only biological son of Abraham, the word speaks of the uniqueness of Isaac as the only son of promise. All other uses are by John (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9), with all testifying to the unique relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

John 1:29, 36 - Identity, Death

The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" . . . and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

These are the only two occurrences of the phrase "Lamb of God" in the entire Bible. In addition, no Old Testament passage contains any combination of the words "sin" and "world." The phrase "the Lamb of God" points to the Jewish sacrificial system, a system still validly in practice when John spoke these words; it is likely any reader would have at least some knowledge of this system. At this point in the story, the text does not address how Jesus is "the Lamb of God" or how He will "take away the sin of the world." However, with the benefit of history, one may understand this statement as a clear allusion to Jesus' sacrificial death.

John 1:40-41, 45, 48-49 - Identity

One of the two who heard John speak and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which translated means Christ). Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel."

When Jesus gave this initial call to the future disciples (recorded only in John), Andrew called Him the Messiah,¹¹ Philip recognized Him as the one prophesied in the Old Testament, and Nathaniel recognized Him as the Son of God¹² and the King of Israel. The reader is not told

¹¹ To understand what is meant in particular uses of the words "Messiah" (Old Testament) or the Greek equivalent "Christ" (New Testament), the reader must look at where along the historical timeline the speaker or author used the term. In the Old Testament, the word "Messiah" occurs but twice (Dan 9:25-26). A related verb, "anoint" is used frequently, especially in the context of anointing priests and kings. Daniel records, in 9:26, that the Messiah will be "cut off," which certainly points to the death of the Messiah. Many Old Testament passages, especially in Isaiah and the Psalms, expand upon what the Messiah would be and what he would do. However, it seems what people understood about Messiah narrowed during intertestamental times. "Jewish hopes were centred [*sic*] on the establishment of God's rule or kingdom, and this hope was often associated with the coming of an agent of God to exercise his rule. Such a person would be a king, anointed by God and belonging to the line of David. The term *Anointed One*, which could be used to describe a king, priest or prophet, came to be used as a technical term in the intertestamental period for this expected agent of God" (I. Howard Marshall, "Jesus Christ, Titles Of," *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996] 576).

That the Old Testament concept of Messiah involved much more than an eschatological Davidic king is clear from the words of Jesus and others. Jesus quoted messianic passages from Isaiah when he confirmed to John the Baptist that He is "the expected one" (Matt 11:2-5), and in Luke-Acts, different speakers affirm that the Christ must suffer, based upon Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 24:24, 26 [Jesus]; Acts 3:18 [Peter]; Acts 17:3 and 26:23 [Paul]). New Testament writers added much depth to the technical use of "Christ," but at times simply used it as a name of Jesus. Whether "Messiah" (as used by Andrew) was limited to referencing Jesus as this promised Davidic King or whether he understood more is not clear. However, even if it is limited to the narrower view, it still speaks of the unique identity of Jesus as "the" Messiah, the one anticipated by Israel.

¹² Did Nathaniel fully understand the meaning of "Son of God?" Some argue he only had limited awareness of the significance of the title. "Why did Nathanael think Jesus was the Son of God and not just a

how they came to these conclusions; however, John accurately recorded these observations made by these soon-to-be disciples.

John 2:18–22 - Death and Resurrection

The Jews then said to Him, “What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” But He was speaking of the temple of His body. So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

During his first year of ministry, Jesus gave this prophesy of his death and his resurrection. John added the explanatory note that Jesus was talking about his body, not the Jewish Temple. Throughout their time with Jesus, the disciples did not understand Jesus’ words about the necessity of his death, but Jesus clearly did speak of it, as here. John further added the explanatory note that they would remember and understand these words after the resurrection, “So the other disciple [John] who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not understand¹³ the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (John 20:8-9). Note, too, that when asked for a “sign,” Jesus answered with this reference to his resurrection. The resurrection is the ultimate “sign” given so that people would “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31).

John 3:12–15 - Death

“If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? “No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Someone with an Old Testament background could easily see in these words of Jesus a reference to the events of Numbers 21:6-9, where God sent fiery serpents against Israel

prophet? The answer seems to be that even the title ‘Son of God’ did not mean deity to all the Jews in Jesus’ day. It meant that the person in view bore certain characteristics of God (cf. Deut. 3:18; 1 Sam. 26:16; Ps. 89:22; Prov. 31:5; Matt. 5:9; John 17:12). Nathanael appears to have regarded Jesus as the Messiah who had supernatural knowledge (cf. v. 45; 2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:6–7; Isa. 11:1–2). However, Nathanael spoke better than he knew. Jesus was the Son of God in a fuller sense than he presently understood” (Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* [Galaxie Software, 2003] John 1:49).

John used the phrase “Son of God” nine times in the Gospel (1:34, 49; 3:18; 5:26; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31). In John 1:34, John the Baptist asserted that Jesus is the Son of God; in 1:49, Nathaniel made the same assertion. The references from 3:18 through 11:4 record Jesus’ words speaking of Himself. In 11:27, Martha affirmed her belief in Jesus as Son of God; and, in 19:7, the Jews claimed Jesus ought to die because He made Himself to be the Son of God. Finally, in 20:31, John explained the purpose of his writing, that (in part) his readers would believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Whether Nathaniel fully understood is not the issue. At a minimum, he recognized the unique identity of Jesus, if “only” as Messiah.

¹³ John used the pluperfect tense of *oida* here. The pluperfect “indicates a past state which had resulted from a previous action. The state of being continued up to some point in the past and then presumably ceased” (James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979] 108). In this case, the past state was unbelief with regard to Jesus’ death and resurrection which ended with belief. For John, this belief came when he entered the empty tomb.

because of their complaining against God and Moses (Numb 21:4-5). The serpents bit and killed many Israelites but God provided a remedy.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.” And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived (vv. 8-9).

In what way is the Son of Man “lifted up”? The event prefigures the crucifixion. Jesus used the phrase “lift/lifted up” two other times in John (John 8:28; 12:32-34).

John 3:16 - Identity

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

In this famous verse, John again referenced the unique relationship between the Father and the Son (“only begotten”). The unique relationship speaks of the greatness of God’s love, as He “gave” this Son. On the surface, “gave” is a simple word, yet, in context, it is pregnant with meaning. The Son must be “lifted up” (crucified, 3:14), not to judge the world, but “that the world might be saved through Him” (3:17). “Gave” speaks of more than simply “sending” the Son to the world, but sending Him to the world to do the work that provides the basis for salvation.

John 4:25-26 - Identity

The [Samaritan] woman said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am He.”

This woman, even though a Samaritan, clearly understood the promise of a coming Messiah.¹⁴

Jesus then identified Himself to the woman as the Messiah whom she hoped for. Jesus did not reveal Himself to the Jews as the Messiah because of their identification of Messiah with a military deliverer almost exclusively. . . . However, He did not hesitate to identify Himself as Messiah to this woman because as a Samaritan she did not hold the common Jewish view of Messiah. The writer used Jesus’ own clear testimony here as another witness to His identity so his readers would believe in Him. Jesus’ self-revelation here climaxes John’s account of this conversation. This is the only time that Jesus clearly identified Himself as the Messiah before His trial.¹⁵

John 5:18 - Identity

For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

¹⁴ This is the second - and final - use of the word “Messiah” in John; it is a transliteration of the Hebrew term. John did use the term “Christ” (the Greek equivalent of “Messiah”) nineteen times.

¹⁵ Constable, *Expository Notes on the Bible*, John 4:26. See also John Peter Lange and Philip Schaff, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: John* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008) 163.

After healing the man at the Pool of Bethesda, the Jews persecuted Jesus because He (allegedly) violated the Sabbath. Jesus responded to this by saying: “My Father is working until now, and I myself am working.” The leaders then sought to kill Him, because, as John explained in this editorial comment, they perceived Jesus as “making Himself equal with God.” The leaders understood the import of Jesus’ words as a claim of deity even though they themselves rejected the claim.

John 6:61-62 - Resurrection, Ascension, Identity

But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, “Does this cause you to stumble? What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?”

The disciples responded to the bread of life discourse, saying this was a “difficult statement, who can listen to it?” (v. 60). Jesus said earlier that “the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven” (v. 33) and that He himself had come down from heaven (v. 38). Now, He said, essentially, “If you think what I’ve said so far is difficult to hear, how will you respond if you see me ascending to where I was previously?” The context identifies “where I was before” as “heaven” (v. 38). Such a reference points, on the one hand, to Christ’s pre-existence (while not necessarily of his eternality) and, on the other hand, to his death and resurrection. Although John did not report the ascension (Acts 1:6-11), he did record a second reference to it in the post-resurrection words of Jesus, where He told Mary He has “not yet ascended to the Father,” and commanded her to tell the disciples that He will ascend to the Father (20:17).

In John 6, Jesus gave no further explanation of this ascension. However, that the entire teaching troubled the disciples is evident by the departure of many of them following the discourse (6:66). Peter, however, spoke for the remaining disciples (excluding Judas, as Jesus made clear in vv. 70-71), “We have believed [perfect tense] and have come to know [perfect tense] that you are the Holy One from God.”

John 7:32–36 - Death, Resurrection, and Ascension

The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about Him, and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent officers to seize Him. Therefore Jesus said, “For a little while longer I am with you, then I go to Him who sent Me. You will seek Me, and will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come.” The Jews then said to one another, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find Him? He is not intending to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks, is He? What is this statement that He said, “You will seek Me, and will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come?”

The Jews – especially the Pharisees and chief priests – were puzzled by the words of Jesus. In this cryptic statement, Jesus once again implied that He would return to the one who sent Him, that is, to God (7:28b, 29). The Jews failed to realize this as a simple reference to death, perhaps due to the unusual statement that He will “go to Him who sent Me.” They certainly did not understand the full scope of Jesus’ words, that to “go back to Him” would entail physical death, resurrection, and ascension (see also 8:14, 21).

John 8:28 - Death

So Jesus said, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.”

Jesus spoke a second time of being “lifted up,” again referencing his future death by crucifixion. Here, however, He did not directly reference the bronze serpent. Jesus said that *when* (i.e. certainty) they lift Him up, they will realize He did not act on his own initiative, but rather “as the Father taught Him.”

John 8:58–59 - Identity

Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

In perhaps the most famous “I am” (ἐγὼ εἰμί, *egō eimi*) statements by Jesus, He made a strong statement of his identity as deity, specifically identifying Himself with “I am” of Exodus 3:14.¹⁶ That the Jews understood it this way is evident by their response: they sought to stone Him, the proper response under the Law for a blasphemer. Of course, the charge of blasphemy cannot hold if what Jesus said of Himself was, in fact, true.

John 10:17–18 - Death, Resurrection

“For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. “No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.”

In the Good Shepherd discourse, Jesus said He would voluntarily lay down his life (a clear reference to his death), but would also “take it up again,” a reference to his resurrection. Verses 19-21 make clear that the listeners did not fully understand his words. Some, in fact, attributed the words of the discourse to Jesus being insane, that is, demon possessed. Others, remembering the miracle of giving sight to the blind man (John 9), said the words could not come from one demon possessed.

John 11:21–27 - Identity, Resurrection

Martha then said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”

Even prior to witnessing Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, Martha’s statement says a great deal about Jesus. She first affirmed her belief in resurrection (Dan 12:2). Jesus then said He “is” the resurrection and the life, which asserts more than the truth of resurrection.

¹⁶ When Moses asked God what he should respond to the Hebrews if they ask the name of the one who sent Him, God answered, “I AM WHO I AM.” The Septuagint translated this reply with the phrase Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν (*egō eimi ho ōn*). The words *egō eimi* are identical to those used by Jesus in John 8:58.

He wanted Martha to think about the Person who would do the resurrecting rather than the event. Jesus raises people to life just as He satisfies people as bread and is, therefore, the essential element in resurrection. Without Him there is no resurrection or life.¹⁷

In her answer, she acknowledged several key understandings of the identity of Jesus. She said she believed what He said about Himself, that He is the Messiah (Christ), the Son of God, the one who comes into the world.

Incidentally, this probably does not represent Martha's initial faith when she received eternal life for it seems more likely that she was reaffirming her belief and that Jesus was offering words of comfort. The reader has only one other passage referencing Martha by name (Luke 10:38-42), where her busyness is contrasted with Mary's "choosing the good part" by sitting at the feet of Jesus. Lazarus is not mentioned elsewhere in the Scriptures. Mary's words to Jesus in John 11:3 that "he whom you love is sick" imply Jesus spent more time with the family than the events recorded in these two accounts. Whether this passage speaks of Martha's conversion or, more likely, reaffirms her belief, her words speak of the unique person and work of Jesus.

John 12:31–33 - Death

"Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die.

Jesus made a third reference to being "lifted up." John here added the editorial explanation that Jesus was speaking of the way He would die (crucifixion).

John 13-16, *passim* - Death

In John 13, the context of Jesus words changes. He was in the Upper Room with the twelve disciples, including Judas. Judas then left the group in order to betray Jesus (13:30), leaving Jesus with the eleven believing disciples for the rest of the discourse. Throughout the discourse, Jesus stated He is going away (speaking of his death), that they cannot follow Him, but they will see Him again soon (speaking of his post-resurrection appearances to them). The disciples did not understand what Jesus meant, even this close to the cross, as evidenced in 16:18, "What is this that He says, 'A little while'? We do not know what He is talking about."

John 19:30 - Death

Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

The verse speaks of his death, clearly evidenced in the words "gave up His Spirit." However, this last saying of Jesus on the cross ("it is finished," τετέλεσται, *tetelestai*) is of particular interest.

¹⁷ Constable, *Expository Notes on the Bible*, John 11:25.

The sixth word or saying that Jesus spoke from the cross was the single Greek word *tetelestai* which means “It is finished.” Papyri receipts for taxes have been recovered with the word *tetelestai* written across them, meaning “paid in full.” This word on Jesus’ lips was significant. When He said, “It is finished” (not “I am finished”), He meant His redemptive work was completed. He had been made sin for people (2 Cor. 5:21) and had suffered the penalty of God’s justice which sin deserved.¹⁸

Consequently, this verb confirms Jesus’ death had an inherent purpose; it was not simply the result of political intrigues. The perfect form of the verb points to the work being finished with ongoing results into the future; that is; it is finished forever! Certainly, it fits with the earlier statement by John the Baptist that Jesus was “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (1:29, 36). However, unlike the Old Testament sacrifices that needed to be made annually, this sacrifice is complete for all time.

Post Death and Resurrection Appearances

Leading to the purpose statement in John 20:30-31, John gave his account of the trials, death, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. He (Jesus) appeared before the disciples (minus Thomas) in 20:20, and they rejoiced. Thomas arrived later and said he would not believe unless he saw the imprint in Jesus hands. Eight days later, Jesus appeared to him and confirmed his resurrection. Jesus then said, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (John 20:29).

The question is, believed what? The issue here does not seem to be “believe in Jesus for eternal life.” Thomas was in the Upper Room, and was among the eleven Jesus said were “clean” (John 13:10-11). The only one identified as not clean in John 13 is Judas (“the one who was betraying Him”). Outside John, Thomas is only mentioned by name in Matthew 10:13, Mark 3:18, and Luke 16:15, all in the context of Jesus calling his disciples, and in Acts 1:13, in the pre-ascension gathering of the disciples. Therefore, one may conclude Thomas was already saved prior to the events of John 20. What Thomas believed here is the *resurrection* of Jesus. Jesus then transitioned to the broader scope of belief followed by the purpose statement.

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so 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).

The two verses make no direct mention of believing in/being aware of the resurrection, although they do include statements about his unique identity. The statement comes on the heels of John’s account of the resurrection and, specifically, Thomas’ response to the proof of the resurrection (the wounds in the hands and side of the living [resurrected] Jesus).

CONCLUSION

Assertions about the person and work of Jesus permeate the book of John. No one denies this. Individual verses (such as John 3:16) do not stand in isolation but are written in the context

¹⁸ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 2 vols., eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985) 2:340.

of who Jesus is and his death, burial, and resurrection (still future relative to the time of the events recorded in chapters 1—12). Application today of those same verses must include what impact, if any, the progress of history and progress of revelation have on the details of the verses. What one does with this information about Jesus is a matter each individual must decide, based upon his interpretation and synthesis of the appropriate biblical texts.

Author's Conclusions

That John spoke a great deal about the person and work of Jesus is beyond debate. Therefore, the passages promising eternal life to any who believe cannot be divorced from the context of who Jesus is and what he has done. The question then arises, what must one understand about Jesus?

The purpose of this writing is not to critique one view or to support another. The study looked at how John integrated the person and work of Jesus into his telling of the story. The present section summarizes the writer's conclusions that came from this work, synthesizing John's words with other New Testament Scriptures.

The multiple references in John to the forthcoming death and resurrection of Jesus, the record of his death and resurrection in John 19 and 20, the placement of the purpose statement after the record of his death and resurrection, the emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus in the sermons of Peter and others in Acts, and the emphasis of the death and resurrection throughout the epistles all lead to the conclusion that the death and resurrection cannot be separated from the gospel (saving message). The Apostle Paul identified the centrality of the cross in the message preached.

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the *cross of Christ* would not be made void. For the *word of the cross* is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach *Christ crucified*, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:17-24, emphasis added).

Paul affirmed that salvation is by faith in Christ (e.g. Gal 2:16, Eph 2:8-9), but the message he proclaimed consistently included the cross and resurrection (e.g. Acts 13:28-30). He summarized the gospel (his "saving message")¹⁹ as follows (verb tenses added):

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached [aorist] to you, which also you received [aorist], in which also you stand [perfect], by which also you are saved [present], if you hold fast [present] the word which I preached [aorist] to you, unless you believed [aorist] in vain. For I delivered [aorist] to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died [aorist] for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried [aorist], and that He was raised [perfect] on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared [aorist] . . . but I labored

¹⁹ While it is true that Paul did not duplicate John's "believe in" structure *verbatim*, his saving message is functionally equivalent (e.g. justified [initial salvation] by faith *in* Christ [Gal. 2:16]). His message clearly identifies Christ as "crucified." The Corinthians were already believers (1 Cor 1:2 ["saints by calling"], 1:21; 3:5; 15:11), thus he spoke of their faith as a fact, inferring in the context that theirs is faith *in Christ* without explicitly stating Him as the object of that faith.

even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. Whether then *it was* I or they, so we preach [present] and so you believed [aorist] (1 Cor 15:1-5, 10b-11).

The verb tenses help understand the point. Twice, Paul used a perfect tense, which speaks of completed action in the past with continuing results in the present. *First*, the phrase “in which also you stand” speaks of the security of the one who believes; it is a permanent result of having believed. Second, the phrase “that he was raised” reminds the reader of the permanent state of Jesus’ resurrection, that is, He was raised and is still raised (alive!).

Three verbs are in the present tense. The first two, “saved” in “by which also you are saved” and “hold fast” emphasize that the gospel has ramifications for sanctification, not just initial salvation. The third, “so we preach” implies this was not just a message Paul gave the Corinthians, but it was the common message he preached wherever he went. The remaining verbs are in the aorist tense, a tense which denotes “an event,” usually in the past (as is the case in each usage here).²⁰ Paul preached this gospel; they believed this same gospel. Paul’s (correct) understanding of the gospel is that Jesus died for sins (the Apostle’s and his reader’s) and that the Lord was raised from the dead; it is this message that the Corinthians believed (v. 11). Therefore, the conclusion reached by this study is that the sole means of receiving the free gift of eternal life is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, who died for sins and was raised from the dead, fully satisfying the requirements for justification. This conclusion fits John’s writings, and thus satisfactorily answers the question posed earlier, “What role, if any, do John’s words about the person and work of Jesus Christ play in defining Him as the object of faith?”

POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

1. Does the conclusion invalidate the message of John, where eternal life is the result of simply believing in Jesus?

No. Passages like John 3:16 are timeless. However, with the progress of history and the progress of revelation, what is known about “Him” has grown. Nevertheless, the core message of the evangelistic passages in John loses none of its force by integrating into it the conclusion of the story, that is, his death and resurrection.

2. Is this not a checklist of things someone must believe about Jesus?

No. Whether a person holds a minimalist view or a more robust view of the content of the saving message, the person coming to believe in Him must know *something* about Jesus, even if only that He promises eternal life to any who believe in Him. The issue is not a “checklist,” but knowing in whom a person is believing for eternal life. So much misinformation exists throughout the world about Jesus that a more robust explanation differentiates the biblical Jesus from the “Jesus” of other systems (such as Islam’s Isa) and from other false gods.

3. Why do not the “believe” passages in John require belief about the resurrection?

²⁰ Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 222-31.

True, there is no explicit statement in John, “believe in Jesus, who will die and be raised from the dead.” However, John accurately reported events that occurred *as they occurred* in history, usually without editorial comment. All the events in John 1—17 occurred prior to both the cross and the beginning of the church. John wrote of them accordingly. Therefore, what is known about the “object of faith” (Jesus) was not as fully developed then as it was by the end of the book. Salvation throughout the Bible was always by faith, and the principle in John of “believe in Jesus” is still valid. However, post-resurrection, more crucial information was known about Jesus. He died for sins and was raised from the dead. The progress of history and the progress of revelation expand the scope of what is to be believed. Only *after* Jesus’ death and resurrection can knowledge of this aspect of Jesus’ person and work be required in the saving message.

When they correctly assert that the Gospel of John was written *to* the church long after the church age began, those who agree that the events of John occurred prior to the resurrection and the beginning of the church make a valid point.²¹ They argue that the saving message in John, therefore, is the pattern for the saving message throughout the church age. The present writer agrees that the basic message, “Believe in Him for eternal life” is the core of the saving message. John’s evangelistic message is that simple, and is still valid. However, he disagrees with the idea that one can divorce the saving message from the work of the Savior. By the time one reads the entirety of John, the fact of the resurrection is clearly seen, with the purpose statement following the record of the resurrection. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume the reader of John who would understand the promise of eternal life for all who believe “in Him” would also know about the death and resurrection of “Him” (Jesus).

4. What about individual verses (“proof texts”) that simply require belief, with no reference to his person or work?

The appropriate use of proof texts is valid. However, even if the text is interpreted properly, the use of proof texts always carries inherent dangers, particularly if used to build a hypothetical situation to prove a point. With that in mind, four points are important. *First*, hypothetical situations are just that. By definition, hypothetical situations are not based upon real events. Therefore, any conclusion drawn from a hypothetical is less certain than any drawn from real situations.

Second, Bible verses always occur in context. The free grace movement frequently cites, correctly, Acts 16:31 as a summary proof text of the saving message, “They said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’” The verse, like every verse in the Bible, occurs in context. Nothing is said about the person or work of Jesus in this verse but, in the next verse, Luke wrote, “And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.” The text does not tell the *content* of what was spoken, but nonetheless, the jailer heard content within the immediate context of Acts 16:31. The jailer was first told to believe (16:31); he and his household then hear the word of the Lord (16:32), and only *after* this are the readers told that the jailer and his family believed (16:34). Just as

²¹ Most dispensationalists believe the church age started on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. For one defense of this view, see Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Dubuque, IA: ECS Ministries, 2005) 109.

with Acts 16:31, John's statements in his Gospel about believing in Jesus for eternal life do not exist in isolation; they exist in a context replete with statements about the person and work of the Lord.

Third, which verse is used as a proof text certainly makes a big difference in the conclusion the reader/listener reaches. What if it were Peter's words in Acts 2:38 ("Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit") or the last part of Philippians 2:12 ("work out your salvation with fear and trembling"), or even John 8:21, ("Then He said again to them, 'I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come.'")? Each "proof text," in isolation, could easily lead the reader/listener astray.

Fourth, and finally, a fully realized hypothetical situation must also assume what God would or would not do. Consequently, for the sake of argument, let it be assumed that Acts 16:31 is *not* sufficient in itself to lead a person to salvation. God could somehow complete the story through some method of his choosing, akin to the stories of the Ethiopian Eunuch or Cornelius. Therefore, it seems dangerous to build a case on a hypothetical situation without taking into account the hypothetical actions of all the players, including God.

5. Does not including the work of Jesus require that a person believe something in addition to believing in Jesus (i.e. are there multiple necessary objects of faith)?

The sole object of faith is Jesus Christ, not faith in Jesus *and* in his death and resurrection *and* in X (whatever else a person may wish to include). The gospel is faith *in* Jesus Christ *as* the Son of God *who* died for sins and was raised from the dead. The gospel message does not add additional objects of faith, it simply identifies clearly the one in whom the person is trusting.