



The Passion and Resurrection According to John

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The Gospel of John moves like a pendulum. It begins at the high point by announcing, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (1:1). Then the story unfolds in a downward arc, as the Word becomes flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. The first disciples receive Jesus gladly, hailing him as Rabbi, Messiah, Son of God, and King of Israel, and accompanying him to Cana’s wedding feast. But the pendulum continues to plunge downward, as the crowds become confused, skeptical, and hostile to Jesus’ claims; they charge that he is a blasphemer, try to stone him, and finally plot his execution. The low point comes in the middle of the gospel, when Jesus’ public ministry ends, and it becomes clear that “though he had done so many signs before them, yet they did not believe in him” (12:37).

The story of the passion follows the upward movement of the pendulum. It begins with Jesus in the posture of a slave, washing his disciples’ feet (chap. 13); but concludes when Thomas recognizes that Jesus is both Lord *and* God (20:28), bringing the story back to the high point where it began in 1:1. Each year John’s passion account appears in the lectionary for Holy Week and his story of the resurrection is appointed for Easter and the Sunday after Easter, providing an opportunity for sustained reading and proclamation of these texts. John’s narrative is masterfully told; the drama is bold, yet subtle. Those who contemplate its message are drawn into the very heart of the Christian faith.

1. Preparations for the Passion (John 12)

Jesus’ final entry into Jerusalem marks the end of his public ministry and introduces the passion narrative. The text read on the fifth Sunday of Lent (12:20-33) introduces a number of themes that recur throughout the passion. *First*, is the universal significance of Jesus’ death. When Jesus approaches Jerusalem he is greeted by Jewish crowds who acclaim him “King of Israel” (12:12-13). But in 12:20-21 a new element appears: some Greeks want to see Jesus. Since these Greeks have come to worship at the feast they may have been proselytes, but the term “Greeks” indicates that they represent a group that is not of Jewish origin. They

approach Philip, who was named after Alexander the Great’s father, and ask to see Jesus. But the Greeks are not brought to Jesus—not yet. Only by being “lifted up from the earth” on the cross would Jesus draw all people to himself (12:32).

Second, despite the horror of the crucifixion, Jesus’ death takes place according to the will of God. Today, if a person of faith who is ninety years old dies peacefully while asleep,

friends might say, “It was God’s will. The Lord took her home.” But when a teenager or young parent is killed in an automobile accident, the death does not seem to be the gracious *completion* of life, but the tragic *interruption* of life. Similarly, Jesus had healed the sick (4:46-5:9), fed the hungry (6:1-14), and raised the dead (11:1-44); and his crucifixion could readily be perceived as a senseless termination to his ministry. Yet according to John, Jesus’ death is the completion, not the interruption of his work. God has appointed the “hour” of Jesus’ death and Jesus’ opponents are powerless to harm him before that time (7:30; 8:20). When the hour arrives, Jesus knowingly and willingly embraces death to fulfill the purposes of God (12:23,27).

Third, the hour of Jesus’ death is the hour of his glorification. When the Greeks arrive, Jesus declares, “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified,” by dying like a grain of wheat (12:23-24). This grim prospect troubles Jesus, but in a scene reminiscent of Gethsemane, Jesus prays that his death will glorify God (12:27-28). To “glorify” (*doxazein*) can simply mean to honor a person or God (e.g. 5:44), but it can also be to manifest God’s power and presence. Jesus has already manifested divine glory by miraculous signs like turning water into wine (2:11) and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:4,40). In answer to Jesus’ prayer, God thunders that his glory has been revealed in Jesus’ public ministry and will be manifested again—in Jesus’ crucifixion (12:28).

The cross reveals the power of God’s glory by revealing the depths of God’s love. Earlier in the gospel, in a play on the word “lift up” (*hypsoun*), Jesus says that when he is physically “lifted up” onto a cross, he will also be “lifted up” or “exalted” in glory. He will be “lifted up” in death because “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:14-16). At the conclusion of his public ministry Jesus again says that when he is “lifted up” in death and in glory, he will graciously draw all people to himself (12:32). The connections between glory and death, and between glory and love persist in subsequent chapters (13:29-32; 17:24-26).

Jesus comments on the significance of his glorification by saying, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:24). On Palm Sunday Jesus stands in the middle of a crowd, but is truly “alone.” Jesus understands the voice from heaven, but bystanders are baffled (12:29). The crowd perceives “lifting up” to refer to Jesus’ death, but can see no connection between death and messiahship (12:32-34). Their comment apparently is based on Ps 89:36, which literally says that David’s “seed shall endure forever,” with the understanding that David’s “seed” refers to the messiah. Finally, the crowd demands to know “Who is this Son of man?” This is the last thing anyone says to Jesus during his public ministry. Their question reflects their misunderstanding, and Jesus soon departs and *hides himself* from them (12:36b). The signs produce widespread misunderstanding; true faith will be evoked through the cross.

This parable about the seed refers primarily to Jesus, but on a secondary level

it also depicts the life of a believer. Jesus explicates this dimension of the parable in two couplets. The first deals with loving or hating the self (*psyche*), and the second focuses on service to Christ (12:25-26). The two couplets must be taken together. The text warns against the love of self that precludes service of Christ. Hatred of the self is not an end in itself, since there are forms of self-hatred that are destructive, not life-giving. Here the term “hate” refers to the first part of

the movement away from preoccupation with the self toward a relationship with God and Christ, which is manifested in service and issues into life everlasting.

Fourth, the death of Jesus marks the defeat of “the ruler of this world” (12:31). According to John’s gospel, the “world” (*kosmos*) was created by God, but had rebelled against God. The world is a realm of darkness and sin (3:19; 8:23-24) which wages war against God and Christ by the power of hatred (7:7; 15:18-19,23-24). Yet God loves the world and seeks to reclaim the world that had rebelled against him. The death of Christ, the supreme manifestation of God’s love, “conquers” (*nikan*, 16:33; cf. 14:30-31) the power of hatred which dominates the world. This element of conflict and victory means that God’s love cannot be reduced to sentimentality. God’s love is a weapon which conquers the world’s hatred, bringing it back into a right relationship with its Creator.

2. Jesus Washes His Disciples’ Feet (John 13)

The passion narrative itself begins as Jesus washes his disciples’ feet and gives them the “new commandment” (Latin *mandatum*), for which Maundy Thursday is named. The footwashing portrays the scandal of the cross. Both Jews and Greeks understood that people washed their own feet (Gen 18:4; Luke 7:44) or had them washed by a slave. To have one’s feet washed by a person of similar or higher social status would have been a disturbing breach of social convention.

For example, in one of his fables, Aesop has a master looking for a pretext to beat him. He asks Aesop to find a dinner guest who will not try to correct the master’s social behavior under any circumstances. When Aesop brings a boorish peasant to the table, the master tells his wife to shock the man by trying to wash his feet. He is confident that the man will stop her and Aesop will get a beating. When the peasant fails to react, Aesop’s master has the cook beaten and the baker burned alive. The peasant is so obtuse that he does not react even at these outrageous actions and Aesop thus avoids the beating. Sometimes a woman would wash a man’s feet as a sign of total devotion. One woman prayed, “Lord, commit me to [my beloved] for a maidservant and a slave. And I will make his bed and wash his feet and wait on him and be a slave for him and serve him for ever and ever.” Even here the man tried to prevent her, and only consented when she insisted on doing it as a sign of love.¹

When Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, he assumes the posture of a slave. The action is parabolic: on a primary level it introduces the death of Jesus as an act of complete, self-giving love (13:1). Jesus “lays down” his clothing, and all the dignity that garments represent, just as he had promised to lay down his life (10:17; 13:4; cf. Phil 2:5-11). When Peter protests, Jesus says, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me” (13:8). Jesus is the subject of the verb in this sentence; Jesus must do the

¹“Joseph and Asenath” 13:15, cf. 20:1-5, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983-1985) 2.224. Cf. 1 Sam 25:41. On Aesop see *Aesop Without Morals*, ed. Lloyd W. Daly (New York: Thomas Yseloff, 1961) 61.

washing, just as he must cleanse in death. Peter assumes that if a little is good then more is better (13:9), but Jesus assures him that the “washing” he provides is a complete one, since his death will fully cleanse from sin. The words “except for the feet” in 13:10 are textually uncertain, but

suggest that Christian life involves repentance, i.e., a repeated return to the cleansing death of Christ. Jesus washes the feet of all his disciples, just as he will die for all; yet he acknowledges that not all will respond in faith. The devil is already at work in Judas (13:2), but Jesus washed Judas's feet along with the others. Jesus did not reject Judas—Judas rejects Jesus. The text recognizes, but does not resolve the mystery of unbelief.

On a secondary level, the footwashing becomes a model for discipleship (13:12-17), an idea reiterated in the new commandment (13:34). As Jesus has given himself completely in an act of loving service for his disciples, his disciples are to give themselves to each other in acts of love, even laying down their lives for each other as Jesus has done for them (cf. 15:13). This love is expressed within the Christian community—Christians are to wash “one another's feet” and to “love one another.” At the same time, love within the community is not an end in itself, but a testimony to those outside it concerning the reality of the love of Christ (13:35; cf. 17:21).

3. *The Trial of the World (John 18:1-19:16)*

John's account of Jesus' arrest and trial is appointed for Good Friday each year. The text is a literary masterpiece that demands to be read and heard. It establishes the context in which the crucifixion must be understood. Earlier in the gospel, Jesus says, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (7:24). This contrast between appearance and reality pervades the entire narrative. Jesus appears to be on trial, but in reality the world condemns itself in these scenes.

The first to appear are the soldiers sent to arrest Jesus. There is no kiss of betrayal in John's account; Jesus takes the initiative by asking, “Whom do you seek?” They reply, “Jesus of Nazareth,” and Jesus says, “I am” (*ego eimi*, 18:6). The soldiers include both Jewish police officers and a “band” (*speira*, 18:3) of Roman soldiers, which consisted of two hundred to six hundred troops led by a *chiliarchos* (18:12), which literally means “leader of a thousand.” In spite of this heavy show of arms, when Jesus says “I am,” recalling the name of God in Exod 3:14, the troops draw back and fall to the ground (18:6). Even though the soldiers represent the highest Jewish and Roman authorities, Jesus is the one who gives orders in this scene, securing the release of his disciples (18:8). The soldiers appear to have power and authority, but in reality these belong to Jesus.

Simon Peter is present with Jesus in the garden. Peter has followed Jesus faithfully from the beginning (1:42; 6:67-69) and now draws his sword to make what seems to be a bold defense of Jesus (18:10). Yet the soldiers are already prostrate and Jesus has already secured the release of the disciples. Peter's “bold defense” is actually a bungling misunderstanding of Jesus' power. When Peter follows Jesus to the high priest's house, the other disciple with him, who is known by the high priest, enters the courtyard without difficulty and obtains permission for Peter to enter. This other disciple's actions reveal that there is no immediate danger, yet Peter inexplicably tells a servant girl that he is not one of Jesus' disciples (18:15-18). One of the slaves had seen Peter in the garden during Jesus' arrest, but, despite the evidence, Peter denies it (18:25-27).

Peter had appeared to be a faithful follower of Jesus, but in reality is not. Peter stands before a servant girl and some slaves, denying everything, while Jesus stands before the high

Jewish authorities, denying nothing. Peter seems to lie when he says he is not a disciple of Jesus, yet his words are profoundly true—by denying his Lord he shows that he is not a disciple. Yet Peter will truly become a disciple later, by another charcoal fire, when he will affirm his love for Jesus three times (21:9,15-19).

The Jewish authorities who appear in these scenes governed most internal affairs of the Jewish people. They try to question Jesus about his activities, but Jesus immediately begins to question them (18:19-21). When an officer strikes Jesus to hold him accountable for such presumption, Jesus demands that the officer himself explain the reasons for the unwarranted slap. The authorities try to put Jesus on trial, but he puts them on trial. The Jewish leaders were obliged to uphold Jewish law and to respect the Roman authorities, who apparently preferred to try capital cases themselves. The priests dutifully bring Jesus to Pilate in conformity with Roman practice and they remain outside to avoid ritual uncleanness in scrupulous observance of the Jewish law. Yet all the while they are committing the ultimate crime—the murder of the Son of God (18:28,31).

The Jewish authorities want to have Jesus condemned on two counts: rebellion against Rome (19:12) and rebellion against God (19:7). On the first count, the Jewish leaders fear that Jesus' followers will incite a revolt against Rome that would destroy the Jewish nation (11:48; cf. 12:13). Yet when the authorities demand the release of Barabbas, the evangelist notes, "Now Barabbas was an insurrectionist" (*lestes*, 19:40). In reality the priests themselves foment rebellion against Rome. On the second count, the Jewish law did prescribe the death penalty for those who blasphemed the name of God (Lev 24:16). Jesus had uttered the words "I am" in ways that sounded like a blasphemous use of God's name and seemed to make himself into God (8:58-59; 10:30-33), thereby deserving punishment. The priests themselves soon will join in the passover liturgy, confessing, "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God, beside thee we have no king, redeemer, or savior...we have no king but thee."² Yet here at the judgment seat they declare, "We have no king but Caesar" (19:15). Caesar, of course, was a man who made himself a god. Jesus had appeared to be the rebel against God and Rome, but in reality the Jewish authorities are guilty of their own charges. They rebel against God by recognizing Caesar as their only sovereign, while incongruously supporting rebellion against Rome by demanding the release of a convicted insurrectionist.

The last participant in the drama is Pilate. As Roman governor he reported directly to Caesar and was considered the most powerful man in the country. Pilate's questions to Jesus concerning kingship are met by Jesus' reply that he had come to bear witness to the truth. Although Pilate feigns ignorance, asking "What is truth?" he actually knows something of the truth, namely, that Jesus is innocent (18:38). Yet Pilate is not *of* the truth. Jesus had said "everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate question but does not listen for Jesus' response (18:37-38). As the drama progresses, Pilate continues to declare that Jesus is innocent (19:4,6), but proves incapable of acting in accordance with that truth. In spite of his claims of power to deal with Jesus as he wishes (19:10), when he tries to release Jesus, he

²Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 126-137; quotation on p. 135.

discovers he is powerless to do so (19:12). Pilate's pretenses are exposed when he capitulates to the powers of falsehood and hands Jesus over for execution.

When we stand before the judgment seat, it is the world, not Jesus, that stands condemned. Representatives of the entire world—Jewish, Roman, and Christian—are weighed and found wanting. The soldiers appear to have power and authority, but do not. Peter seems to be a loyal disciple, but denies his Lord. The Jewish authorities are guilty of rebellion against God and Rome, and the mighty Pilate proves powerless to act according to the truth. The sin of the world has been exposed. Jesus now goes to die as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). The sign on the cross will proclaim his identity in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek, for all the world to see (19:19-20).

4. *The Crucifixion (19:17-42)*

The horror of crucifixion was well-known. The Roman philosopher Seneca, a contemporary of Jesus, thought it better to commit suicide than to “weigh down on one’s own wound and hang impaled on a gibbet.” Seneca asked, “Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed...drawing the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross!”³ To almost any observer, Jesus’ crucifixion would appear to be a brutal termination of life.

The Fourth Gospel, however, portrays the crucifixion as the glorious completion of Jesus’ ministry and the fulfillment of God’s will. In contrast to the other gospels, John says that Jesus went out “bearing his own cross” (19:17); there is no suggestion that Simon of Cyrene had to help Jesus reach Golgatha. Unlike the other gospels, there is no reference to darkness or mocking at the cross. Instead, the text stresses that the cross brings Jesus’ ministry to its *telos* or “goal.” Jesus knows that all is now “accomplished” (*telein*, 19:28a) and asks for a drink “to accomplish” the scriptures (*teleioun*, 19:28b). His final words are “It is accomplished” (*telein*, 19:30). The cross is the completion, not the interruption of Jesus’ ministry.

The Old Testament scriptures provide further clues to this Johannine perspective. An ordinary observer would assume that the soldiers divide Jesus’ clothing and cast lots for his tunic for the sake of their own personal gain. But John explicitly states that these actions fulfill Ps 22:18, indicating that the scene is governed by divine purposes (John 19:23-24). Again, Jesus’ words “I thirst” (19:28) could be a simple statement of human need. But John points out that this too accomplishes God’s will, since the vinegar fulfills Ps 69:21.

The Old Testament also helps explicate the piercing of Jesus’ side and the failure to break his legs. Death by crucifixion came slowly, as the victim, nailed in a twisted position on the cross, gasped for breath while struggling against the shock, blood loss, and searing pain. A soldier could hasten death by shattering the victim’s lower leg bones, thereby adding to the shock and removing much of the support necessary for breathing.⁴ The Jewish leaders ask that the legs of Jesus and the others be broken to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross. Since the Law stated that “a hanged man is accursed by God,” they should not defile the land by leaving

³Epistle 101.12,14, in *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, vol. 3, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1962) 165, 167.

⁴William D. Edwards et al., “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255 (March 21, 1986) 1455-1463, esp. 1461.

them on the cross overnight (Deut 21:22-23; John 19:31-32). Because Jesus is already dead, however, they do not break his legs, but pierce his side to ensure that he is dead.

The evangelist notes that Jesus was crucified at the time the Passover lambs were slain, on the day of Preparation beginning at the sixth hour (19:14). Neither the bones of Passover lambs nor the legs of Jesus are broken, which meant that Jesus is a perfect Passover sacrifice (Exod 12:46; Num 9:12; John 19:33,36), the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). The Jewish leaders feared that Jesus' death would bring defilement; in reality it brings cleansing from sin. The act of piercing fulfills Zech 12:10 (John 19:37), and the blood and water that flow from the wound fulfill the promise Jesus made earlier, that all who thirst will drink from him, for "out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water" (7:38). The spear, which intended to show that Jesus was dead, actually reveals that he is the source of life.

The scene with Jesus' mother and Beloved Disciple brings Jesus' ministry to a fitting conclusion. Jesus' mother appears only twice in John's gospel: at Cana and at the cross. In both places Jesus calls her "woman" (2:4; 19:26). Cana was the beginning (*arche*, 2:11) of his ministry, the cross its conclusion (*telos*, 19:28). Cana anticipated the "hour" of Jesus' death and manifested his glory in a preliminary way (2:4,11); at the cross the final "hour" of glorification has arrived. At Cana Jesus' mother showed a confident though uncomprehending trust in Jesus (2:5); at the cross he entrusts her to the Beloved Disciple, who is a special witness to Jesus (13:23-26; 21:20-24). By giving these two people to each other Jesus forms the nucleus of a new community of faith at the foot of the cross.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus bring the scene to its appropriate conclusion by anointing Jesus' body for burial. Americans measure spices and perfumes by the ounce, and Judas was scandalized when Mary Magdalene anointed Jesus with a pound of myrrh (12:3-5). Yet Nicodemus brings one hundred pounds of spice and perfume for Jesus' burial (19:39). The enormous amount is fit only for the burial of a king. Though Joseph of Arimathea fears the Jews, and Nicodemus has formerly come to Jesus only under the cover of darkness, in the royal burial they give Jesus there is hope that Jesus' promise will be fulfilled: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32).

5. *The Resurrection (20:1-31)*

The story of Jesus' resurrection in John begins with two scenes that offer searching commentary on the genesis of resurrection faith (20:1-18). Each year this passage is one of the lectionary's Easter lessons. Opponents of Christianity charged that Jesus had not risen, but that his body had been stolen (cf. Matt 28:13-15). John counters such claims by declaring that even Mary Magdalene, who discovers the open tomb, first assumes Jesus' body has been stolen (20:1-2). Faith in the resurrection does not emerge easily or naively; from the beginning it arose *despite* claims to the contrary.

Peter and the Beloved Disciple respond to Mary's report by racing to the tomb. Tension builds progressively as the Beloved Disciple reaches the tomb and sees the cloths, Peter enters the tomb and sees the neatly folded headcloth, and, finally, the Beloved Disciple enters, sees, and believes (20:3-8). The folded grave cloths mean the body could not have been stolen; Jesus must be alive. The Beloved Disciple does not reach this conclusion because he expects Jesus to rise; neither he nor Peter

connects the empty tomb with Old Testament promises at this point. Instead, the resurrection itself creates a new perspective from which to understand the old texts (cf. 2:22; 12:15-16). Peter sees the empty tomb, but there is no sign yet that he believes in the resurrection. The Beloved Disciple does believe when he sees the grave cloths, but seeing does not give him a full understanding of the event or prompt him to tell anyone of his faith (20:10). Proclamation of the resurrection will come only in response to an encounter with the risen Jesus himself.

For Mary Magdalene, seeing is *not* believing. Mary sees the open tomb (20:1), two angels inside the tomb (20:12), and even the risen Jesus (20:14), yet persists in thinking that the body has been stolen (20:2,13,15). She recognizes Jesus only when he calls her by name (20:16). It is not seeing but the word of Christ which evokes a faith that helps her make sense of what she has seen. When Mary attempts to cling to the familiar “rabbi,” Jesus tells her to return to the disciples, for the first time called Jesus’ “brothers,” and to tell them of his ascent to their God and Father. Jesus will not remain with the disciples physically, as Mary thinks, but will be present within the community of faith through the Spirit he will give them when his ascension is complete (16:7; 20:22).

The next two scenes (20:19-31), read each year on the Sunday after Easter, deal with the significance of the resurrection for Christian discipleship and mission. The first scene roots discipleship in the faithfulness of Christ by showing how Jesus gives his disciples the gifts of peace (14:27; 20:19,21), joy (16:20-22; 20:20), and the Spirit (14:26; 20:22) as he has promised. Jesus then sends his disciples into the world, as God has sent him into the world (17:18; 20:21), to forgive and retain sins. In John’s gospel, retaining sins means to identify and hold people accountable for sins, as Jesus had done (cf. 7:7; 8:24; 9:40). Sins are identified to awaken the need for grace, just as the world’s sin was exposed in John 18-19 before Christ died to save it. Retention is done for the sake of forgiveness, in the same way a frank diagnosis prepares a patient for a cure.⁵

The disciples’ first attempt to proclaim the resurrection seems to be a resounding failure. Thomas had once gone to Jerusalem for the raising of Lazarus (11:16) and had been present at the Last Supper, where Jesus told him, “If you had known *me* you would have known my *Father* also; henceforth you know him and have *seen* him” (14:5,7). But when the disciples tell Thomas, “We have seen the Lord,” he is not merely skeptical—he makes seeing and touching Jesus a pre-condition for belief (20:25). Yet when Jesus appears to him, in a way that recalls the previous words of Jesus and the other disciples, Thomas confesses his faith by declaring that Jesus is both Lord and God (20:28; cf. 20:25a; 14:7). Jesus himself transforms Thomas’s unbelief into faith, a faith informed and expressed by the testimony Thomas has heard before. In the same way, Jesus will continue to evoke faith in people of subsequent generations, through the witness of the Fourth Evangelist and others, in order that they too may have life in Christ’s name (20:29-31).

⁵Cf. Luther’s Sermon on the First Sunday of Easter, in *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. John N. Lenker, 31 vols. (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands, 1903-1910) 11:386.