

A sure thing Death and eternal life in the Gospel of John

Jo-Ann A. Brant

Ours is an impatient society. We demand ever-faster service from our computers and our internet providers. We purchase the objects of our desire on credit. Why wait, when we can have it now? Perhaps this impatience is the reason the Gospel of John has overtaken the Gospel of Matthew in our society as the most quoted of the four Gospels. The Gospel of John seems to guarantee eternal life, beginning right now, with easy terms and no unpleasantness. Jesus promises that “anyone who hears my word

The statement “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (3:16) paradoxically links life and love with an act of lethal, selfless giving.

and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed over from death to life” (5:24). By believing, we cease to be children born of flesh and blood and become children of God.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus repeats this claim many times in various ways. But the clarity of the claim gives way to paradox when we read it in its narrative context.¹ Yes, eternal life begins with belief (1:12), and yes, it is desirable: it is a life lived in the fullness of Christ’s joy and love (15:10-11). But there is a catch. Jesus’s glory is revealed in his death,

and we manifest our share in divine love when we are willing to forsake the security this world offers, when we too are willing to die. The statement “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (3:16) paradoxically links life and love with an act of lethal, selfless giving.

Jesus affirms that those who have already died will be resurrected and will face judgment (5:29).² But to his followers he says that eternal life begins now, this side of the grave, with a spiritual rebirth made possible by his incarnation. Physical birth and death

define the borders of biological life, but Jesus's coming into the world mediates divine life now to those who receive him. In contrast, those who reject him can be physically alive but spiritually dead.

As Jesus's coming changes the meaning of eternal life, so his dying changes the role that death plays in the human condition. Death was not part of God's intention for creation and had been seen as a consequence of sin. Now John's Gospel describes Jesus's crucifixion not as humiliation but as his exaltation and glorification.³ Through his death our relationship with him is not severed but strengthened, because his dying reveals his love for us.

Likewise, the Resurrection is not a remedy for Jesus's death but is its complement; it allows life and love to abide. As his followers, we do not mourn his death. We feel sorrow for his suffering on our behalf, but our joy is made complete by his abiding presence (16:22-24). For those who abide in Christ, death is not Sheol, a shadowy existence in which we wait for resurrection and judgment; it is a door through which we enter our Father's house (14:2-3) or a sleep from which we will awaken at our resurrection (11:11). Just as God became incarnate and dwelt with us in the person of Jesus (1:14), Jesus's resurrection prepares a place for us to dwell with God (14:2).

In one of the many wordplays in the Gospel, Jesus talks about the role of death in the eternal life that begins here and now. In his discourse on the light of the world, Jesus says, "Whoever keeps my word will never see death" (8:51). His antagonists parrot his words, but in slightly altered form: "You say, 'Whoever keeps my world will never *taste* death'" (8:52; my italics). They get it wrong: those who believe in Jesus *will* taste death. In fact, Jesus makes tasting death a condition of life when he says, in his discourse on the bread of life, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (6:53).

In his last public discourse, Jesus issues a general invitation to die, using a botanical analogy: we are like grains of wheat that must fall to the earth and die in order to bear fruit (12:24). Jesus does not mean the obvious—that we must die in order to be resurrected. He continues, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also" (12:25-26).

For those who abide in Christ, death is a door through which we enter our Father's house. Just as God became incarnate and dwelt with us in the person of Jesus (1:14), Jesus's resurrection prepares a place for us to dwell with God.

I suspect that when Jesus says we will not see death, he is drawing on the Old Testament tradition in which *seeing* signifies *valuing*. People tend to be influenced by appearance. Eve “saw that the tree was good for food” (Gen. 3:6). When Samuel proclaimed Saul king, he said to the people, “Do you see the one whom the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people” (1 Sam. 10:24); the narrator has told the reader that the people see a man “taller than any of them” (1 Sam. 10:23). Jesus’s comment that “whoever keeps my word will never see death” may then mean that although we face physical death, we do not attribute to it power over our lives.

If we pay attention to the plot that unfolds in the Gospel of John, we notice that Jesus’s death on the cross is not just an expression of love for all humanity but is the result of his love for a particular person, Lazarus. The story of Lazarus fulfills the claims Jesus made in his discourse on the good shepherd (John 10:1-18). There Jesus states that the good shepherd gives his life for his sheep. Then he makes it clear that his own death is such a death: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11). “And I lay down my life for the sheep” (10:15b). “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again” (10:17). “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (10:18). The virtue of laying down one’s life in behalf of another is also extolled in the farewell discourse, when Peter claims that he will lay down his life for Jesus (13:37-38), and when Jesus says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13; see also 6:51; 17:19).

When he cries, “Lazarus, Come out!” (11:43), Jesus is the shepherd who is calling his sheep by name. Lazarus’s resurrection excites messianic expectations, and the crowd in Jerusalem testifies that Jesus is “the King of Israel” (12:13), a claim that makes the people likely targets for violent suppression by Roman authorities. This dynamic is the reason for the high priest Caiaphas’s observation that “it is better for you to have one man

die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (11:50). Jesus’s opponents see his life-giving act as life-threatening, so they conspire to kill him.

Resurrection threatens the political order by disabling its most powerful weapon. If order is maintained through the fear of death, and if the line between life and death is eliminated, rulers lose their ability to control. Moved by his conviction that he can save the nation from death at the hands of the Romans, Caiaphas purchases political life by handing Jesus over to Rome. But by acknowledging Roman power and relying on Roman security, he betrays another conviction. He and his followers are made to shout, “We have no king but the emperor” (19:15). An appeal to political necessity is exposed as a denial of God’s sovereignty.

We should not ignore Caiaphas’s logic. It is the logic that informed U.S. military aggression against Iraq: it is better for us to

Resurrection threatens the political order by disabling its most powerful weapon. If order is maintained through the fear of death, and if the line between life and death is eliminated, rulers lose their ability to control.

have a few Iraqis die than to have many Americans face the threat of weapons of mass destruction. And we should affirm the truth in Caiaphas’s words that he does not understand. Jesus does indeed die for the people, but not so that we can go on living in fear of the power of death. We must deny Caiaphas’s logic. As children of God, we are invited to live without fear of death, for the death of our bodies has no ultimate significance.

Throughout the Gospel narrative, characters move from the security of conventional or traditional truths to receive Jesus and the truth that he offers. They move away from the security of social allegiances and roles toward a path that entails rejection, conflict, alienation, and death. Nicodemus, the Pharisee, struggles to understand how one can be reborn (3:4). Hearing his story, we realize that the underlying question is not how but why. Why give up one’s position of authority and respect by starting again? Many of us romanticize our early years, but few of us wish to relive the struggle to find one’s place in society.

In challenging the injustice of the Pharisees’ condemnation of Jesus, Nicodemus risks losing his place among them. They respond, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?” (7:52).

Because Nicodemus remains silent through the remainder of the Gospel, commentators seem compelled to put words of confession or denial in his mouth. We cannot see into Nicodemus's heart, but his participation in Jesus's burial, an act that allies him with the family of an executed criminal, seems an implicit acknowledgment that making political alliances to secure one's social status is deadly. Perhaps his gift of an excessive quantity of myrrh (19:39) can be seen as an attempt to mask the stench of decay surrounding the life the state offers.

The life to which Jesus invites his followers is not social or political security of the kind offered by Caiaphas or the Pharisees. If we want to abide in him, we will take risks. Like Nicodemus, we will risk alienating ourselves from those with status and authority. In fulfilling Christ's command to love one another, we risk denial and betrayal. Eternal life requires that we relinquish our attempts to control our fate. It means making ourselves vulnerable to the inconstancy and the judgment of this world, armed with its threat of death. In doing so, we recognize the one true constant, the one sure thing, God's love.

Notes

¹ 1:18; 3:16; 4:14; 5:21, 24, 39-40; 6:40, 47-48; 8:12, 51; 10:10, 28; 11:26; 13:31-32; 17:6, 26; 18:37; 20:30-31.

² The provision for resurrection and judgment makes room for discussion about salvation for those who do not believe in Christ.

³ References to Jesus's death as the hour of glory: 2:4; 7:6, 8; 12:23, 27; 13:1, 31-32, 17:1. References to the crucifixion as exaltation: 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34.

For further reading

Lincoln, Andrew T. "I Am the Resurrection and the Life': The Resurrection Message of the Fourth Gospel." In *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker, 122-43. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Nielsen, Helge Kjaer. "John's Understanding of the Death of Jesus." In *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives: Essays from the Scandinavian Conference on the Fourth Gospel in Århus 1997*, edited by Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen, 232-354. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

Thompson, Marianne Meyers. "Eternal Life in the Gospel of John," *Ex Auditu* 5 (1989): 35-55.

About the author

Jo-Ann A. Brant has been a professor of Bible, religion, and philosophy at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana, since 1993.