

## **Can the Unbeliever Understand John's Gospel?**

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### I. INTRODUCTION

This paper was born out of a conversation I had with a gentleman who attended the GES 2005 Southern California Regional Conference. He was an evangelist and his preferred method of evangelizing was using a sort of "hand-puppet," which he could turn inside out several times. Every time he turned it inside-out it revealed a different color, like white or black or gold. It was much like some adults evangelize children. They have the child make a bracelet using colored beads, each color representing a different aspect of the evangelism message, e.g., black represents sin, red represents Christ's blood which was shed for sin, etc.

This is how this man evangelized. However, he said that he did this in front of hundreds of people not just children. When I got an opportunity to speak with him, I informed him that he could use the Word of God itself, specifically the Gospel of John. His response was rather interesting. He told me that the Gospel of John was too difficult for people to understand. I think his words were: "They're not gonna to get that; that's too hard."

Ever since that conversation I began contemplating the ramifications of such a statement. What it implies about God and what it implies about the unbeliever's eternal state. If God cannot communicate with the unbeliever, then the unbeliever is forever lost, but more importantly it means that God cannot accomplish His own stated purpose as it is found in John's Gospel. If this is the way the believer views John's Gospel, then he/she is neglecting the very book God designed to evangelize the unbeliever. John's Gospel can be seen as the only shovel that God has provided believers to dig the hole for the Gospel seed.

The other tools God provided believers, i.e., the other books of the Bible, are designed for other tasks. They can be seen as hammers, saws, chisels, and the like. Can one dig a hole with a hammer? Undoubtedly one can. However, would it not be wiser to use the shovel God has provided? Thus, this paper seeks to take a closer look at this shovel, i.e., the Gospel of John, in order to see if in fact it can do what God designed it to do, i.e., can the unbeliever understand it?

### II. DOES THE UNBELIEVER UNDERSTAND HIS PROBLEM AND SOLUTION AS JOHN PRESENTS THEM?

#### *A. Does the Unbeliever Understand that his Problem is Death?*

As we begin to look at John's Gospel, we must ask two questions that pertain to the message it must communicate to the unbeliever. The first one is, "Does it communicate to the unbeliever that his problem is death?" The unbeliever's problem that he cannot escape from is death. This dilemma is stated at the very beginning of man's existence. When God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He informed him that on the day that he ate of it, he would die. Some might think that sin is man's problem and not death. However, Scripture is very clear on this issue.

Sin was totally and completely paid for and not potentially. It is a completed reality. 2 Corinthians 5:19 states that *God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them*. Man does not nor did he get charged with his own sin, however, Christ was charged with the world's sin. The unbeliever cannot be imputed with his own sin because Christ has already charged for it. 1 John 2:2 states that Christ is *the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world*. Christ "is" the propitiation; it doesn't say that He will be or can be, but that He *is*. This is a completed act. In fact John's Gospel states this very truth. In 1:29 John says that Christ is the one *who takes away the sin of the world*, 1:29.

Since the unbeliever's problem is death, does John's Gospel communicate that to the unbeliever and can he understand it? In **John 3**, Jesus, as He's speaking with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, speaks about the death that awaits every unbeliever. However, He begins by talking about life in terms of birth. He tells Nicodemus that *unless one is born again He cannot see the kingdom of God*. By the time Jesus says verse 14, He starts talking about the unbeliever's death, but He begins by talking about His own death.

He does so by using Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. Although the unbeliever may not understand this reference, with verse 15 the unbeliever begins to understand that he will perish (die) unless he believes in Jesus. When Jesus states verses 16-18, the point of this is clear: those who believe in Christ receive everlasting life but those who do not will have to face death, i.e., they will perish because they stand condemned already. The closing verse of chapter three repeats this message: those who do not believe will not see life. What's the opposite of life?

In **chapter five** there is a heavy focus on life and death. In this chapter Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, which to the religious leaders is a capital offense. A conversation ensues between them and Jesus informs them that He's merely doing what His Father (God, cf. 1:18) taught Him. He adds that He has the power to raise the dead and give them life, just like the Father and that the Father has committed all judgment to Him.

In verse 24 He says something interesting that harkens back to what He said in chapter three about life and death. He repeats His promise of life to those who believe<sup>1</sup> and He adds that those who believe will not face His judgment, but that instead they have passed from death to life. This informs the unbeliever that the moment he believes, he escapes the judgment of death that is looming.

Jesus repeats this idea in verse 25 stating that the “dead” who hear His voice right now will live. He then describes the future judgment that is coming. Everyone who comes up from the grave and has done “good” receives resurrection of life. But those who have done bad get resurrection of condemnation, which harkens back to the condemnation that He mentioned in 3:18, where He said that those who do not believe stand condemned already.

In **chapter six** the emphasis on life and death continues. Jesus keeps telling those present that He is the source of life who will resurrect those who believe in Him. In 6:48-50 He states that He is a superior bread than that which was eaten by the fathers in the wilderness because whoever eats (believes) this bread will not die, which reminds the unbeliever that Christ is the way to escape death.

In **John chapter eight** the unbeliever is again reminded of his death problem. In verse 24, as Jesus is having a conversation with some Pharisees in the Temple Treasury, He says to them, *if you do not believe that I am [He], you will die in your sins.*<sup>2</sup> This again references that death that awaits someone who does not believe in Christ. Towards the end of the chapter in verse 51 Jesus mentions the looming death problem once more by saying that those who “keep” (i.e., believe) His word, will never taste death.

All these references to the upcoming judgment of death, which cannot be avoided apart from receiving everlasting life from Christ, point to the unbeliever’s problem of death. Also, Christ’s incessant offer of life throughout John’s Gospel (see: John 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14; 5:24, 38-40; 6:40, 47, 51, 53, 54, 57, 58; 10:10, 26-28, 11:25-26; 20:30-31) would communicate to the unbeliever that there is a problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Some at this point might question whether the unbeliever would understand the promise of life because the way Christ states it makes it seem as though one has to believe “in” God the Father (the word “in” is not in the original Greek, but no argument is made based on this fact, since the unbeliever would not know that) instead of Him. However, later in the dialogue (5:37-39) Christ states that the Father has testified of Him in His Word, His Scriptures, wherein the religious leaders are hoping to get eternal life. And Christ corrects them that they (the Scriptures, i.e., His Father’s testimony) is that the One in whom is found eternal life is His Son, whom He sent.

<sup>2</sup> Some might object that the unbeliever would not understand what Jesus means here because of the way He phrases His offer of life, but by this point in John’s Gospel, the offer has been so oft repeated that the unbeliever would only be thinking of one thing and that is Jesus offer of everlasting life.

## *B. Does the Unbeliever Understand that his Solution is Life?*

Since the unbeliever's problem is death, does John clearly present the unbeliever with the solution: life? Actually, within the previous discussion on death is imbedded the solution, i.e., life. However, that discussion began in chapter three. Does John's Gospel communicate the solution prior to chapter three? Yes it does. In fact, John discusses the life issue from the very beginning. The first mention of "life" is in John 1:4 where the unbeliever is told that in Him<sup>3</sup> (i.e., Jesus) was life and that that life was the light of men.

The reference to life does not stop there. In 1:12 there is a veiled reference to eternal life as John informs the unbeliever that those who believe in Jesus' name become children of God. When John describes how they become children of God, he makes another reference to life. He tells the unbeliever that these are born (i.e., given life), but not by natural means but by God's own will. Thus, from the start, John's Gospel begins to talk about the solution, even before it ever mentions the death problem.

After chapter one this same message of life is repeated over and over. In **chapter three** in one form or another Christ presents His offer of everlasting life five times. In **chapter four** He presents it to the woman at the well. In **chapter five** Jesus presents it to the religious leaders who seek to kill Him for healing a man on the Sabbath. In **chapter six** He presents it at least seven times to some of the same individuals who were part of the 5,000 he fed with five barley loaves and two small fish. Additionally, Peter proclaims that Jesus is the one who has the words of eternal life. In chapter ten He presents the solution of life twice to some Pharisees.

**Chapter eleven** is unique in John's Gospel in its offer of everlasting life to the unbeliever because not only does Jesus promise to provide everlasting life and resurrection in chapter eleven, He proves that He can deliver on this promise by raising Lazarus from the dead. In **chapter twelve** (12:50), Jesus states that His mission of providing everlasting life to mankind is a command He received from God. Speaking of life in **chapter fourteen** (14:6), Jesus says that He is the way the truth, and the life and no one can come to the Father except through Him. In **chapter seventeen** (17:2), Jesus states that He will give eternal life to as many as the Father has given Him. Finally, at the end of **chapter twenty** John states that the purpose for the signs in his Gospel are so that people will believe and receive life in Jesus' name.

How can the unbeliever be persuaded that this man Jesus Christ can provide everlasting life? He proves His ability to deliver on this promise with all of the miracles He performs. The purpose statement says that "these are written." What do "these" refer to? It's to the eight signs, which begin in chapter two and end in chapter twenty with the Lord's resurrection. John's Gospel as a whole communicates the message of life to the unbeliever.

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<sup>3</sup> When the unbeliever gets to verse 17, he finds out that the "him" in 1:4 is a reference to Jesus.

### C. What the Unbeliever May Not Understand in John's Gospel

Some might think that the unbeliever will not understand these various offers of everlasting life in John's Gospel because of the way Jesus sometimes presents that offer. For example, sometimes Jesus uses metaphors for the word "believe": in chapter 4 He uses *drinking*, in chapters 5 and 6 He uses *coming*, in chapter six He uses *eating* and *drinking*, in chapter 10 He uses *hearing*, additionally in chapter 1 John uses the metaphor *receiving*. Will the unbeliever understand these metaphors? Yes, each one of them has a context that clearly indicates what is being offered and that the metaphor is simply that, a metaphor for *believing*. Additionally, the metaphors used are sometimes equated with the word "believe." In 1:12 *receiving* equals believing and in chapter 6 *coming* and *eating* equals believing, 6:35, 47-51.

But even assuming that the metaphors in and of themselves were confusing, the unbeliever would still understand that the metaphors meant "believe" for two reasons: (1) the sole condition for receiving everlasting life in John's Gospel is belief. This is set by John in 1:12 and by Christ Himself the first time He presents the offer of eternal life in 3:15, and (2) the word "believe" is directly related to the offer of life over fifty times in John's Gospel.<sup>4</sup> It is repeated so often that the one would have to not read the book in order to miss it.<sup>5</sup>

Are there things that the unbeliever may not understand in John's Gospel? Yes, there are. Some of those things relate to Israel and its history. For example, in 1:17 John mentions the Mosaic Law, if the unbeliever is unfamiliar with Israel's' background, then he will not understand what John is talking about. A similar thing happens in 1:19-28, a section that mentions the Christ, Elijah, and the Prophet in a conversation that ensues between John the Baptist and those sent from the Pharisees. The unbeliever will not know what these mean or even what the word "Pharisee" means without a Jewish background.

When John's Gospel quotes the Old Testament is another possible area that the unbeliever may not fully understand, unless he knows the Old Testament passages and what they mean. There are also certain events that he may not understand, e.g., baptism (he may wonder why John the Baptist and Jesus' disciples are baptizing people), the feasts that are held in Jerusalem like Passover, and he may wonder how it is that those who took Jesus to Pilate would be defiled if they entered the Praetorium, (18:28). The unbeliever may also wonder why the Temple plays such a central role in many of the events recorded by John. These and many other things the unbeliever may not understand.

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<sup>4</sup> See: 1:7, 12; 2:11, 23; 3:15, 16, 18, 36; 4:39, 41, 42, 53; 5:24, 38, 44, 46, 47; 6:29, 35, 36, 40, 47, 64; 7:5, 31, 38, 39, 48; 8:24, 30, 31, 45, 46; 9:35; 10:25, 26, 37, 38, 42; 11:25, 26, 40, 42, 45, 48; 12:11, 36, 37, 39, 42, 44, 46, 47; 16:9; 17:20, 21; 19:35; 20:31.

<sup>5</sup> Further, these offers of everlasting life do not occur in a vacuum. They are part of an overall context that is focused on presenting everlasting life to the unbeliever, who will suffer the punishment of death without it. So that, for example, when the unbeliever reads in chapter five about a coming judgment and condemnation he will not be puzzled because Christ mentioned in chapter three that those who believe in Him are not condemned, but those who do not believe stand condemned already and will not see life

However none of these things are crucial for the unbeliever to understand the central message addressed to him: Christ provides the answer to his death problem, everlasting life.

D. *Can the Unbeliever Really Understand John's Gospel: An Unbeliever Reads John's Gospel*

Is it truly possible for an unbeliever to understand John's Gospel? The following are potential comments that an unbeliever might make as he reads the first 18 verses of John's Gospel:

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

*It looks like this Word-thing goes back to the very beginning and that it was God?*

<sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God.

*"He was in the beginning," so this Word-thing was a man? How can that be if the Word-thing is God? How can God be a man, a God-man? Hmm..*

<sup>3</sup> All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

*This God-man made everything, everything?*

<sup>4</sup> In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

*The God-man had life in Himself? I guess it makes sense. If he's able to create everything, he must have the power of life somehow. And this life seems to be a light for mankind somehow.*

<sup>5</sup> And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

*I guess that makes sense. How's the dark gonna get the light, since the two can't mix.*

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe.

*So God sent a man named John to testify about the Light, the God-man, so that everyone would believe. Believe what? In the light, the God-man? Hmmm.*

<sup>8</sup> He was not that Light, but *was sent* to bear witness of that Light.

*So John's just a witness, he's not the God-man.*

<sup>9</sup> That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.

*The God-man is the true light, which gives light to everyone "coming into the world." In verse 4 he said that life = light. I wonder if he's saying that the God-man is the one who gives life to everybody who's born ("coming into the world")?*

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

*Wait a second. This says that the God-man came to earth and that He made the earth—I guess that makes sense if he created everything else. But it also says that the world didn't know him...hmmm?*

<sup>11</sup> He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.

*Did the God-man have relatives on earth? But it looks like they didn't want him.*

<sup>12</sup> But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

*It looks like some of his relatives did receive him. And it looks like those who did get to be children of God because they believed in him, "in His name"?*

<sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

*The ones who believed in him were born? How can they be born-again? Wait a second that's what those "born-again" Christians talk about. But it looks like this is talking about some different kind of birth that God orchestrates.*

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

*So the God-man became human and he did come to earth; it says he “dwelt among us.” And it says that the God-man has a father; a God-man with a father...hmm?*

<sup>15</sup> John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.' "

*There's that guy John again testifying. And he says that the God-man was before him; I guess that makes sense, if the God-man was with God way back at the beginning.*

<sup>16</sup> And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.

*So the God-man gave us some kind of fullness....and “grace for grace.” Did he gave us grace; how did he give us grace? Hmm?*

<sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses,

*That must have something to do with the Jews.*

*but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

*The God-man is Jesus Christ?! And it does say that he gave grace and truth...the God-man is Jesus Christ...hmm?*

<sup>18</sup> No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared *Him*.

*So the father of the God-man is God. This means that Jesus Christ is the son of God.*

*So all of this says that Jesus Christ was with God at the beginning, He is God and God is his father, He created everything, and he has the power of life and the ability to make people “born-gain” or children of God when they believe in Him....hmm, how's he able to do that?*

Can you see how the unbeliever, from the beginning is given the message of life? Before sin is discussed, before death is discussed, he's told that Christ is the Son of God with the power of life, who can make him a born-again child of God. And the further he reads the more he's persuaded of this truth. He's told in 1:29 that Christ is the one who takes away all sin. He sees Christ turn water into wine in **chapter two**. He sees the offer of everlasting life presented several times in **chapter three** and all that is required is belief, as he saw in the first 18 verses.

He sees Christ offer that same promise of life to the woman at the well in **chapter four**. Jesus heals a man who's been sick 38yrs in **chapter 5** and the promise of salvation is again made. And on and on it goes; the offer of life keeps getting presented. And if he gets to **chapter eleven** still unconvinced, Jesus gives him an iron-clad guarantee that He can deliver on His promise of life when He gives life to a dead man named Lazarus.

Now, you might say, "But this is someone who is interested in looking at John's Gospel. What about someone who is negative to it, who doesn't want to read it?" Well, that's not a problem of not being able to understand it. That's a problem of refusing to believe, which is the whole question as far as the unbeliever is concerned, will he believe the message. Christ has His arm stretched out with everlasting life at the end of it and He's asking the unbeliever: "Will you believe?" Someone who's refuses to read it, has rejected the message.

### III. WHAT ARE THE RAMIFICATIONS IF GOD CAN AND CANNOT COMMUNICATE WITH THE UNBELIEVER?

*A. If God can communicate with the unbeliever, then salvation is available to him*

Obviously, if God is able to communicate with the unbeliever, then everlasting life is available and waiting to be received by the unbeliever. He will be forever saved, if he believes in Christ's promise of everlasting life. Not understanding the message is not an excuse, because it is understandable. The question is, "Will he believe?" not can he understand

*B. If God Cannot Communicate with the Unbeliever, Then he's Forever Lost, But More Importantly it Implies that God Cannot Accomplish His Purpose*

What are the ramifications if God cannot communicate with the unbeliever? The first one is obvious. If God cannot communicate with the unbeliever, then the unbeliever has not hope because God is the one who holds his salvation in His hand. If He cannot communicate this to the unbeliever, then the unbeliever is forever lost, doomed to hell. But in this instance the unbeliever would have a gripe against God. He could protest at the final judgment that God cannot condemn him to hell because he never got the message. And the unbeliever would be right. God in that instance could not send him to hell.

The second ramification may not be so obvious. If God cannot communicate with the unbeliever, then God is no longer God because He failed to accomplish His own stated purpose. What did God say His purpose was for John's Gospel in 20:30-31?

<sup>30</sup> And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;

<sup>31</sup> 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.

If God cannot accomplish what He says, how can the believer trust Him to deliver on His promise of life? He can't. How can anyone trust Him to deliver on any of His promises? Israel's supposed to be restored and have her Promise Land back once again. Will this happen? His Son is supposed to come back and defeat the antichrist and all his minions and establish the new kingdom. Will that take place? What about all those who've died trusting God to resurrect them in the future? Will they be resurrected or are they lost forever?

The moment believers say that the unbeliever cannot understand John's Gospel, we undermine all of Scripture and God Himself. Instead of unbelief on the part of believers towards John's Gospel, what should be our attitude towards this Gospel?

### *C. How Should the Believer View John's Gospel*

I don't think believers who say this, i.e., that John's Gospel is too difficult for the unbeliever, knowingly engage in undermining God's Word. But we as believers must think about how we view Scripture and what we say about it. If God has told us that He wrote a particular book to evangelize the unbeliever, then we should take Him at His word and trust that He will accomplish His purpose.

This is something I struggled with myself. I used to view John's Gospel this way. I was convinced that the unbeliever would not be able to understand this book. But I discovered my error. My error was that I only had part of the Gospel, a very important part, but only part. I thought that the Gospel was: "Do you believe that Christ died on the Cross for your sins?" I thought the Gospel was the Cross and it is, but it's not just the fact that Christ died and rose again. This is a means to an end, the end being everlasting life.

Because I saw the Gospel this way, I was looking for such a statement in John's Gospel. But I couldn't find it. So I concluded that the unbeliever would be forever lost trying to figure it out. However, when I discovered that the Cross was the means and the ends is everlasting life, I saw how perfect and complete John's Gospel was for the unbeliever.

And it is interesting Christ never asks anyone to believe in His death and resurrection. The only thing He asks individuals when we see Him witnessing in John's Gospels (chapter 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, etc) is, "Do you believe I provide eternal life?" It's always an offer of life.

Believers, instead of viewing John's Gospel as something that is too hard for the unbeliever to understand, should look at it as the primary message that God wants us to give the unbeliever because that's exactly what He designed it for according to His own stated purpose for the book in 20:30-31.

A note on the Living Water booklets: these booklets have some notes scattered here and there. But even these are not necessary for the unbeliever to get the message.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Yes, there are things that the unbeliever may not understand about John's Gospel, however, it is abundantly clear from the very beginning in stating both the unbeliever's death problem and his solution: everlasting life. Believers should therefore utilize it as such, especially since God designed it for this very purpose, 20:30-31. If God cannot communicate with the unbeliever, then it implies that the unbeliever is forever lost and that God cannot be trusted to do what He says.