

Resurrection Life: Is It for Those who Have Done Good? (John 5:29)

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INTRODUCTION

CERTIFIED WITNESSES IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

John’s Gospel certifies seven witnesses (#1–#7) on the right side of the chart below. (This summarizes the uses of the Greek words for *witness*, *testimony*, and *testify* in John). The first five witnesses are unimpeachable under any circumstances. The sixth and seventh certified witnesses received certification as people commissioned to represent the Lord. Other people gave testimony within the book. Some (such as the Samaritan woman in John 4:39) gave accurate testimony, but lack certification.

I. Witnesses who Could Never Be Impeached

A. The Trinity:

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|---|-----|
| 1. The Father: 5:32 , ¹ 37 ; 8:18b | #1* |
| 2. Christ: 3:26, 32-33; 4:44; 5:31 ; 7:7; 8:13-14, 18a; 13:21; 18:37 | #2* |
| 3. Holy Spirit: 15:26 | #3 |

B. Divine Works:

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| 1. Scriptures: 5:39 | #4* |
| 2. Christ’s works (His signs): 5:36 ; 10:25 | #5* |

II. Witnesses who Might (Under Certain Circumstances) Be Impeached

A. Official representatives of the Lord:

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| 1. The eleven | #6 |
| a. The eleven (in general): 15:27 | |
| b. The Apostle John (in particular): 19:35; 21:24a-b | |

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| 2. John the Baptist: 1:7-8, 15, 19, 32, 34; (5:32?), 5:33 | #7* |
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B. Other People (with varying degrees of reliability): —*

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| 2:25; 3:11, 28; 4:39; 5:34 ; 8:17; 12:17; 18:23 | |
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The asterisked witnesses appear in John 5. Four of the unimpeachable witnesses give testimony in John 5,² so they are asterisked. John 5:34 indicates that Jesus does not receive human testimony. Therefore, even though people are to receive the Baptist’s testimony, Jesus only receives the testimony of those who could never be impeached (#1–#5).

¹ The present author agrees with the NKJV’s capitalization *He witnesses*. The capitalization of He says that the Father is the witness in 5:32. Some would prefer lower case (e.g., John the Baptist would be the one witnessing).

² John 16:7 says that the Holy Spirit could not be given until Christ ascended: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” (NKJV) Thus, it is not surprising that the Holy Spirit’s role as a witness does not occur before the Upper Room.

WITNESS AND TESTIMONY IN JOHN 5

The testimony/witness word-group receives heavy usage starting in John 5:31 (5:31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 39). Verse 31 implies that Christ's opponents asserted that He was the only one who testified on behalf of Him. In response, Jesus named four unimpeachable witnesses (whose testimony He Himself receives): the Father, Christ, the Scriptures, and the works that Christ did). He also named John the Baptist as a witness that His opponents should receive (even though Christ Himself did not).

Upon hearing (or reading) testimony, two responses are possible: to believe it or to disbelieve it. Not surprisingly, contexts which speak of testimony often mention belief/disbelief of that testimony. John 5 shifts between the related concepts of testimony/witness and belief.

³¹If I **bear witness** of Myself, My **witness** is not true. ³²There is another who **bears witness** of Me, and I know that the **witness** which He **witnesses** of Me is true. ³³You have sent to John, and he has **borne witness** to the truth. ³⁴Yet I do not receive **testimony** from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. ³⁵He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. ³⁶But I have a greater **witness** than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—**bear witness** of Me, that the Father has sent Me. ³⁷And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has **testified** of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.

witness

belief ³⁸But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not **believe**.

³⁹You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which **testify** of Me. ⁴⁰But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. ⁴¹I do not receive honor from men. ⁴²But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you. ⁴³I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.

witness

belief ⁴⁴How can you **believe**, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you -- Moses, in whom you trust. ⁴⁶For if you **believed** Moses, you would **believe** Me; for he wrote about Me. ⁴⁷But if you do not **believe** his writings, how will you **believe** My words?

John 5:31ff. depicts Jesus' opponents disbelieving every form of authenticated testimony to which He appeals. However, the idea of disbelief appears long before verse 31. The passage gives clues that the issue of belief/disbelief of testimony begins with the first courtroom setting of the chapter (verses 15–18). Actually, there are two separate trials in this passage:

1. Judeans Put Jesus on Trial (John 5:15–18)
2. Jesus Puts Judeans on Trial (John 5:19–47)

JUDEANS PUT JESUS ON TRIAL (JOHN 5:15–18)

Opposition to Jesus begins as soon as the lame man identified Him as the One who healed him. Note John 5:15–18.

¹⁵The man departed and told ~~the Jews~~ Judeans that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶For this reason ~~the Jews~~ Judeans persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷But Jesus answered them, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.” ¹⁸Therefore ~~the Jews~~ Judeans sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only **broke the Sabbath**, but also said that God was His Father, **making Himself equal with God**.

His Judean antagonists sought to kill Him, because:

1. He broke the Sabbath, and
2. He presented Himself as equal with God.

These Judeans *believed* that these two actions gave irrefutable *testimony* that Jesus was guilty of capital crimes. The reasoning went something like this:

1. Judeans accused Jesus of being a Sabbath-breaker.

Major premise: *Humans must obey the Sabbath.*

Minor premise: *Jesus is human.*

Conclusion: *Jesus must obey the Sabbath.*

2. Jesus countered the accusation by claiming to be the Son of God.

Major premise: *The Father can work on the Sabbath.*

Minor premise: *Jesus is the Father’s Son.*

Conclusion: *Jesus can work on the Sabbath.*

3. Judeans countered by denying that Jesus is the Son of God.

Major premise: *Humans cannot become the Son of God.*

Minor premise: *Jesus is human.*

Conclusion: *Jesus cannot become the Son of God.*

4. Judeans again accused Jesus of being a Sabbath-breaker.

Major premise: *Humans must obey the Sabbath.*

Minor premise: *Jesus is human.*

Conclusion: *Jesus must obey the Sabbath.*

These Judeans believed that Jesus was guilty of at least two capital offenses. However, rather than having a stoning that day, Jesus turned the tables on them. His accusers end up as the ones on trial.

JESUS PUT HIS JUDEAN ACCUSERS ON TRIAL (JOHN 5:19–47)

The second trial has three movements:

1. Jesus asserts His authority to give life and to judge (19–23)
2. Jesus offers two alternatives: everlasting life or condemnation (24–30)
3. Jesus adduces five witnesses to support (31–47)

HIS AUTHORITY TO GIVE LIFE & TO JUDGE (19–23)

In verses 19–23, Jesus asserts that He does what His Father does, in accordance with what His Father wants.

¹⁹Then Jesus answered and said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. ²⁰For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel. ²¹For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. ²²For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, ²³that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.”

Verses 21–22 are our focal point: The Son gives life (now), but the Son will be the judge (who condemns to death at the Great White Throne).

In a beautiful irony, Jesus seeks to give life to those who seek to take away His life. These Judeans want Jesus to be judged and killed. He wants to give them everlasting life, so that they would not face Him as judge at the Great White Throne. They thought of themselves as judges, but He is the judge supreme. They wanted to judge Him that He might die; He wished to give them life so that He would not need to judge them.

HE OFFERS LIFE, BUT WILL JUDGE THOSE WHO REFUSE LIFE (24–30)

Verses 24–26 are good news. Jesus offers His accusers everlasting life, rather than judgment. Verses 27–30 are bad news: Those who reject His offer of life will face Him as judge. Let us consider the good news first.

JESUS GIVES EVERLASTING LIFE TO BELIEVERS (24–26).

This passage is familiar and focuses on good news. It expands verse 21.

²⁴Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. ²⁵Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. ²⁶For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself.

Verse 24: Why Jesus did Jesus speak of believing in the Father who sent Him, rather than believing in Himself. The Father and the Son testify the same things about the Son (cf. the passages in the chart on page 1 of this paper). The content that would be believed is the same. However, His listeners did not view Jesus as a reliable witness. John 5:24 tells them to believe a witness they regard as reliable: the Father. However, the content is the same in either case. Jesus gives everlasting life to those who believe His promise of life: *He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life* (5:24a). This refers back to verse 21: *For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will [literally: wishes]*. Those the Son wishes to give life are those who believe His promise of life.

Verse 24b relates the promise of life to not facing judgment at the Great White Throne: *[He] shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life*. If one receives everlasting life as a gift, he does not need to appear at a judgment to determine whether he should live. In other words, believers will not be at the Great White Throne.

Verse 25: Phraseology here resembles that of verse 28, but the meaning is not parallel.

²⁵*Most assuredly, I say to you, **the hour is coming, and now is**, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.*

²⁸*Do not marvel at this; for **the hour is coming** in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice.²⁹ and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

Verse 28 speaks of a yet future hour that is coming. Verse 29 identifies that coming hour with the Great White Throne. By contrast, verse 25 adds *and now is*. His opponents would grant that the dead would (at some future time) come to life. They were prepared for Jesus to say something akin to verses 28–29.

His opponents were not prepared for anything like verse 25, which gives context for verse 24. That is, spiritually dead people who hear His voice now can receive life (verses 24–25). Those who do not hear His voice now, will indeed hear it at the Great White Throne (verse 28).

a	<i>Most assuredly, I say to you,</i>	<i>Most assuredly, I say to you,</i>	a'
—		<i>the hour is coming, and now is,</i>	b'
c	<i>he who hears My word</i>	<i>when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear</i>	c'
d	<i>and believes in Him who sent Me</i>		—
e	<i>has everlasting life,</i>	<i>will live.</i>	e'
f	<i>and shall not come into judgment,</i>		—
g	<i>but has passed from death into life.</i>		—

Observe that *c* and *c'* correspond as do *e* and *e'*. Both verses portray the idea that believing hearers will live. The word *dead* in *c'* refers to those who are spiritually dead.

Verse 26: This passage gives the reason that Jesus gives life to spiritually dead people who hear His voice and believe the promise. He can do this, because life is the possession of the Son, just as much as it is the possession of the Father. Jesus has every right to give life, as verse 21 has already affirmed.

JESUS WILL JUDGE THOSE LACKING LIFE (5:27–30)

Whereas verses 24–26 expand verse 21, verses 27–30 amplify verse 22.

²²*For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son.*

²⁷*and [the Father] has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. ²⁸Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. ³⁰I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.*

What indicates that verses 27–30 apply only to unbelievers? The emphasis on judgment is the key. In this regard, let us consider verse 24 again.

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

If we take verse 24 seriously, the judgment from which believers escape is the judgment of verses 27–30 (the Great White Throne). In other words, these verses speak of those who do not hear His voice and believe the promise of everlasting life during their lifetime on earth. Those people—unbelievers—will hear His voice (in their graves) as He summons them to the Great White Throne.

Verse 27: The Father has given Christ authority to execute judgment at the Great White Throne, because He is the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13–14). Son of Man is a term of deity.³ The fact that Christ is God’s Son qualifies Him to be judge.

Verses 28–29: Christ will summon all who are in the graves to appear at the Great White Throne. We already established (on page 5 of this paper) that verse 28 is a future reference, whereas verse 25 was a contemporary reference.

³ Within the argument of Daniel 7, Son of Man is a term for deity, not a term for humanity. In the vision, one like a son of man is contrasted with four bestial kings. However, observe that Daniel 7:14 says *all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him*. The Aramaic word translated *serve* should be rendered *worship*. Cf. Daniel 3:12, 14, 18, 28; 6:17, 21; 7:27. Note also that Daniel 7:14 speaks of Him having an everlasting dominion. The point of the term son of man is that He does not have bestial qualities, like the four preceding kings. However, He is described as God. Thus, the term Son of Man should be understood as a term emphasizing deity, not humanity.

Both John 5 and Revelation 20 speak about a judgment of those who had died physically. John 5 speaks of Christ summoning people while they are in the graves, but it says little about the judgment itself.

*John 5²⁸Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which **all who are in the graves** will hear His voice ²⁹and come forth—those who have done good [things], to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil [things], to the resurrection of condemnation.*

Revelation 20:13 does not mention the summons, but speaks of the sea, Death, and Hades giving up their dead. The passage speaks of the dead standing before God and being judged for their works.

*Revelation 20¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. ¹²And I saw **the dead**, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And **the dead** were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. ¹³The sea gave up **the dead** who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up **the dead** who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.*

Jesus will be a fair judge. If there were any unbelievers found who had done works that impressed God, the fair judge would not bar them from life. However, the question is: How many people at the Great White Throne will merit life by works? The answer is: No one will.

Contextually, it is extremely important that Christ be found a fair judge. His opponents have sought to judge and execute Him for breaking the Sabbath and claiming to be equal with God. They were guilty of an unrighteous judgment. By contrast, when the Father committed all judgment to Christ (John 5:22), He was entrusting a righteous judge. As a righteous judge, He will give people at the Great White Throne the opportunity to demonstrate through their works whether they deserve life. He will judge righteously. None will merit life at that judgment.

A TRANSLATION ISSUE

Please note that the translation of John 5:29 adds the word *things* twice. There is an important reason for this. Both the word *good* and the word *evil* are plural.

*John 5²⁸Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹and come forth—those who have done **good [things]**, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done **evil [things]**, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

Some view *doing good* as believing in Christ's promise and *doing evil* as not believing His promise. The fact that the words are plural renders such an approach highly suspect.

AN OBSERVATION

Some have objected to Jesus' message of everlasting life in John by saying, "Even unbelievers will exist forever, so how could everlasting life mean living forever?" They miss the point. That John describes unbelievers as dying forever, but believers as living forever. Those who miss this point (as a result) sometimes assert that Jesus *only* speaks of an *enhanced quality* of life, when He says everlasting life. However, if that were true, why does He say in John 10:10b, *I came that they **might have life** and that they **might have it more abundantly***? The abundant life is where Jesus speaks of the enhanced quality of life; having (eternal) life is where He speaks of living with God forever. All believers in Christ will live forever with God; all unbelievers will exist forever apart from God in the Lake of Fire. Those believers who are pleasing to the Lord as believers will not only live forever with God, but will live that life abundantly and will be rewardable at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

CONCLUSION

In verses 24–26, Jesus offered everlasting life to those who sought to kill Him. Those who believed His irrevocable promise of everlasting life would receive it as a gift. Those who did not believe what the Son of Man said about the gift of life will face Him as their judge at the Great White Throne. They will face death eternally.

In answering the question posed by this paper's title, everlasting life is not for those who have done good things (as revealed by Christ's judgment). Rather, everlasting life is for those who have heard His voice and have believed His promise of life to them.