

Those that Have Done Good Things (John 5:28)
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Many wonder how to reconcile John 5:28-29 with the faith-alone message of verse 24:

²⁸Don't be amazed at this, because a time is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹and will come out: those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life; but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of judgment.

²⁴Amen, amen, I tell you, whoever hears My word and believes the One who sent Me has eternal life, and will not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Contextual background alleviates the difficulty.

John 15:1-18 as Backdrop for John 5:19-30

Jesus healed a man during the Feast of Booths, who was lame for thirty-eight years. He said, "Pick up your bedroll and walk!" When religious officials called him a Sabbath-breaker for carrying his bedroll, he identified Jesus (who said to pick up his bedroll) as his healer.

John 5:4 says, "an angel would go down into the pool from time to time and stir up the water. Then the first one who went in after the water was stirred up recovered from whatever ailment he had."¹ Multitudes of people with debilitating ailments waited by this pool on this Sabbath, anticipating the stirring of the water (even on a Sabbath). Jesus' defense against the Sabbath-breaker charge is that the Father works (on the Sabbath), so the Son can work on the Sabbath. John 5:17: "My Father has been working until now [sending an angel to heal], and I have been working [in healing the lame man]." The underlying premise of John 5:19-30 is that the Son has the same rights as the Father.

Exposition of John 5:19-30²

The passage starts and ends with a thesis: The Son only does what He sees His Father do.

1. As the Father resurrects and gives life, so does the Son (5:21, 24-26),
2. As the Father committed judgment to Him, the Son will judge (5:22-23, 27-29).

¹ Critical Text translations omit John 5:4. Even those who reject this verse must acknowledge its point, because of verse 7, "I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I'm coming, someone else goes down before me." Someone (either God or an angel directed by Him) stirred the water. The first into the pool was healed. God the Father did heal individuals after the water was stirred—even on a Sabbath.

² Scripture references in John are from *Living Water: The Gospel of John with Notes*. 5th rev. Logos 21 version. Translated by Author L. Farstad. [Glide, OR]: Absolutely Free, 2006. Other scriptures are from the New King James Version (Nashville: Nelson, 1982), unless otherwise noted.

The Thesis: The Son Imitates the Father (5:19, 30)

The first and last verses form an inclusio (stating the thesis: The Son imitates the Father):

¹⁹*Amen, amen, I tell you, the Son is not able to do anything by Himself, but only what He sees the Father doing. For whatever He does, these things the Son also does in the same way.*

³⁰*I can do nothing by Myself. Just as I hear, I judge, and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of the Father who sent Me.*

Jesus focuses on two works that the Father authorizes Him to do: giving life and judging.

First of Two Greater Works: As the Father Resurrects and Gives Life, so does Jesus (5:21)

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He wishes.

Second of Two Greater Works: The Father Committed Judgment to the Son (5:22)

The Father, in fact, does not judge anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son.

Jesus amplifies these two works: life-giving in vv 24-26 and judging in 27-29.

Amplification of Jesus as Life-Giver to Believers (5:24-26)

John 5:24 states the proposition that Jesus gives life to believers. Verse 25 restates the proposition. Verse 26 explains the basis upon which Jesus can give life: He has life in Himself.

Jesus Gives Life to Believers (John 5:24). The verse is justly famous for both its positive affirmations about everlasting life and of passing from death to life as well as for its denial that believers will come into judgment (the Great White Throne).

Amen, amen, I tell you, whoever hears My word and believes the One who sent Me has eternal life, and will not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Believing the Father in John 5:24. Christians often find the statement about believing the Father perplexing. Some say, “I thought we were supposed to believe Jesus for His promise of everlasting life.” The answer is quite simple: In this context, Jesus has said that He does what He sees the Father doing. He says what the Father wants Him to say. John 12:49 says, *For I have not spoken on My own authority, but the Father who sent Me, He gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak.* In light of this, let us consider part of John 5:24: *Whoever hears My word [which is from the Father] and believes the [Father who speaks through Me].* Jesus says what the Father wants Him to say, so believing Jesus’ word involves believing both the Son who spoke it and believing the Father who gave it to Christ.

Why would Jesus speak here of believing the Father? His opponents understood (5:18) that He meant God, when He spoke of His Father (5:17).

But Jesus answered them, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working?” So for this reason the Jews were trying all the harder to kill Him, because not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

In 5:24, when Jesus speaks about believing the Father, He (in effect) says, “Don’t just take My word for it. Believe what the Father who sent Me says [through Me].”

The Content of Faith in John 5:24. Those who believe what the Father says about Christ: have everlasting life, will not come into judgment, and have passed from death into life.

Believers have passed from death into everlasting life, so they do not need to go to a judgment to be awarded it. By analogy, my birth in the United States rendered me an American citizen. I did not need to appear in a court to become naturalized. When one believes Jesus Christ for His promise of everlasting life, he is born again into life. The first birth is unto death. Thus, when a person believes Jesus’ promise of everlasting life, he passes from death to life. As a supernatural-born³ citizen of LIFE, believers do not need to appear in a court to become naturalized citizens of LIFE (they already have that citizenship by reason of the second birth).

Jesus Gives Life to Believers: Restated (John 5:25). Before considering the content of this verse, it is appropriate to observe the difference between this verse and 5:28:

*Amen, amen, I tell you, a time is coming, and is now here, when **the dead** will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live (5:25).*

*Don’t be amazed at this, because a time is coming in which **all who are in the graves** will hear His voice (5:28).*

Though both verses say, “a time is coming,” only v 25 adds “and is now here.” Both say dead people hear Christ, but v 28 speaks about those in the graves (corpses). Verse 28 speaks of people at the Great White Throne. It resembles Revelation 20:11-13’s summons to the GWT:

Then 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. And 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. The 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.

John 5:28 is purely futuristic, pointing to the Great White Throne. Physically dead unbelievers will hear Christ summon them to the judgment.

John 5:25 speaks of time: “An hour is coming, and is now here.” In combination, He means: “It is new to you, but it is already occurring.”⁴ The kind of dead who were then hearing Christ’s voice were the spiritually dead. Thus, John 5:25 speaks of unbelievers hearing Christ’s word and receiving life (because they believed the word they heard). Contrarily, 5:28 speaks of physically dead unbelievers hearing Christ’s future summons to the Great White Throne.

³ This plays on the phrase: native-born, but “super-native born” is a bit ambiguous.

⁴ Jesus told the Samaritan woman that things were already different than she thought: *But a time is coming, and now is here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. Yes, the Father is looking for such people to worship Him (John 4:23).* Likewise, He warned the eleven of persecution that would start in a matter of minutes, where soldiers would seek to stamp out Christ and His followers: *Listen: The time is coming, and has now come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and you will leave Me alone. (John 16:32a).*

What does John 5:25 mean? The easiest way is to parallel it with v 24. Both verses speak of spiritually dead people hearing and believing while alive physically.

	John 5:24	John 5:25	
a	<i>Most assuredly, I say to you,</i>	<i>Most assuredly, I say to you,</i>	a'
b	—	<i>the hour is coming, and now is,</i>	b'
c	<i>he who hears My word</i>	<i>when the [spiritually] dead will [now] hear the voice</i>	c'
d	<i>and believes in Him who sent Me</i>	<i>of the Son of God;and those who hear</i>	d'
e	<i>has everlasting life,</i>	<i>[and believe it]</i>	e'
f	<i>and shall not come into judgment,</i>	—	f'
g	<i>but has passed from death into life.</i>	—	g'

Amplification of Jesus as Judge of Unbelievers at Great White Throne (5:27-29)

Verse 27 starts with *kai* (and). The Father has granted for the Son to give life (vv 24-26), and to judge (27-29). Believers receive everlasting life and are not judged (vv 24-26). Unbelievers are judged. None will merit everlasting life. Verses 27-29 discuss the Great White Throne, not believers. What we say matches what Zane Hodges says about Rom 2:6, 7, 10, and 13. His comments follow his citation of the verses:

. . . who ‘will render to each one according to his deeds’: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality . . .

. . . but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

. . . for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified (Rom. 2:6, 7, 10, 13).

. . . In Romans 2 Paul is discussing how God will deal with men in the final judgment (Rom. 2:5). One should remember that born-again believers do not come into that judgment (John 5:24). At the judgment bar of God, the day of grace will be past and [unbelieving] men will stand before their Judge for His final assessment of their lives (see Rev. 20:12). His judgment will be impartial and based on their works. Those who have persevered in doing good may expect eternal life. Those who not only heard, but kept, God’s law, will receive God’s justification.

But who are these? There are none. Romans 3:20 says so plainly. So does Romans 3:9-19—very emphatically!

The standpoint in Romans 2 is analogous to a judge who has a line of defendants ranged before his tribunal. Speaking in the non-prejudicial language of the law-courts he might say to them, “In this courtroom everyone will get exactly what he deserves. The innocent will be cleared, but the guilty will be condemned to punishment.” Does this statement imply that some of the defendants *are* innocent and *will* be cleared? Of course not. The judge is simply stating the principles which will obtain in his court. Justice and equity will be the hallmarks of this judicial proceeding.⁵

⁵ Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: Faith and Works in Tension*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1992), 102. Italics in original. Hodges and I only briefly discussed this before his death.

The Son Will Summon Deceased Unbelievers to the Great White Throne (5:28-29a).

The earlier section (vv 24-26) considered Jesus' authority to grant life to believers. This section discusses the judgment of unbelievers, based on their works.

Of many commentaries on John's Gospel, William Hendricksen (apparently) alone recognizes that John 5:24 precludes believers from any part in 5:28-29. No one at the Great White Throne will be found whose life consisted of doing good things. Hendricksen sets forth John 5:24-25 and Rev 20:4-6 as first-resurrection (e.g., believer resurrection) passages and John 5:28-29 and Rev 20:11-15 as second-resurrection (e.g., unbeliever resurrection) passages.

A. *First Resurrection [John]*

I most solemnly assure you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has everlasting life . . . has passed out of death into life. I most solemnly assure you, the hour is coming—when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live [5:24-25].

. . . and (he) does not come into condemnation . . . [5:24b]

B. *Second Resurrection* (unto judgment)

Stop being surprised about this, the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs: those who have done good, for the resurrection of life, and those who have practiced evil, for the resurrection of condemnation [5:28-29].

A. *First Resurrection [Revelation]*

“. . . and I saw *the souls* of them that had been beheaded . . . and such as worshiped not the beast, neither his image, and received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. . . . *This is the first resurrection* [Rev 20:4-5]

“Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection: over these the second death has no power [20:6a].”

B. *Second Resurrection* (unto judgment)

“And I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it. . . . And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works: And the sea gave up the dead that were in it. . . . And if any was not found in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire [20:11ff].”⁶

Hendrickson's chart is useful, even if his amillennialism puts him at odds with himself. Jesus introduced two greater works in vv 21-23: giving life and judging. Verses 24-26 expand the issue of giving everlasting life (and resurrection)⁷ to believers. On the other hand, vv 27-29 speak of judging deceased unbelievers according to their works. As with Rom 2:6-13, none at the GWT will merit everlasting life by their works.

Zane C. Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John Part 6: Those Who Have Done Good—John 5:28–29,” *BSac* 136 (April–June 1979): 158–66, wrote on this passage.

⁶ William Hendricksen, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 200. Italics in original. The translation seems to be Hendricksen's. His system is complex.

⁷ Although verses 24-26 do not mention resurrection, they expand v 21, which speaks of the Son giving life, because He sees the Father resurrecting and giving life. Although not mentioned directly in vv 24-26, resurrection is implicit. John 11:25-27 explicitly discuss Jesus as the Resurrector and the grantor of everlasting life.

Alternate Theories of “Those who have done good” (5:29)

One common theory is that Jesus refers to good works done by persevering saints. Another is that believing in Christ is the good deed. As an immediate critique, both of these views place believers in the judgment section (vv 27-29). This paper critiques such an approach.

“Those who Have Done Good” as a Reference to Works Done by Persevering Saints. Reformed and Arminian interpreters alike appeal to this, but the idea is totally gratuitous. Leon Morris is typical. Oblivious to John 5:24, he imagines believers being judged to determine whether they stay saved:

All the dead will rise. Judgment, as always in Scripture, is on the basis of works. It is those who “have done good” who attain “the resurrection of life” (cf. 6:39f), while those who “have done evil” rise only to “the resurrection of judgment” (or “condemnation”; see on 3:17f). This does not mean salvation is on the basis of good works, for this very Gospel makes it plain over and over again that men enter eternal life when they believe on Jesus Christ. But the lives they live form the test of the faith they profess. This is the uniform testimony of Scripture. Salvation is by grace and it is received through faith. Judgment is based on men’s works.⁸

We must take John 5:24 seriously. Verses 27-29 focus on a judgment of unbelievers only.

“Those who Have Done Good” as a Reference to Believing in Christ. This view has found favor in preaching in some grace circles.⁹ Colin Kruse says, “In this Gospel doing good means believing in the one God sent into the world, while the ultimate evil is to reject this one, and refuse to believe in him.”¹⁰ Of course, the attraction of this view is that it would seem to answer the perseverance view (just discussed above). However, it has several fatal flaws (any one of which is sufficient to disprove this view):

1. It places believers in the judgment section (contrary to John 5:24).
2. The word “good” is plural (those who have done good things).
3. Faith cannot both be meritorious and non-meritorious.

Conclusion

Unbelievers will have opportunity to claim to merit life, but none will actually merit it. Jesus is a fair judge, in keeping with what Zane Hodges articulated about Romans 2. Jesus Christ will be a just version of Judge Roy Bean. Unbelievers at the Great White Throne will be given a fair trial. Anyone and everyone who merits everlasting life by their works will be resurrected unto life—but, of course, no such people will be at the Great White Throne. Why? Believers will not appear there. The only people at the Great White Throne will be unbelievers. None of them will merit everlasting life by their works.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 321f.

⁹ I encounter it often in talking with seminary students and in traveling, but rarely see it in print.

¹⁰ Colin G. Kruse, *The Gospel according to John*, TNTC (Leicester, ENG: Inter-Varsity, 2003), 155.