

### Panel #3: Is Explicit Belief in Jesus' Death and Resurrection Necessary for Eternal Salvation?

I'm going to begin my five minutes by apparently flinging myself into a very deep hole. All I ask is, hear me out. "Is explicit belief in Jesus' death and resurrection necessary for eternal salvation?" That's our question, and here's my answer: I don't care, and I don't have to. The reason I don't care is that there are supervening considerations—two of them—that make this question irrelevant.

I talked in the first panel about how we need to faithfully present John's message. Let me draw on some of that now. Suppose a member of my flock asks me to visit his uncle Jack in the hospital. Jack's a cancer patient, and he doesn't have much longer to live. So I go to visit him, and he tells me that his nephew brought him a Bible and told him to read John's gospel. He's gotten up through John 11. His eyes light up as he tells me "Peter's right – Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God! I'm going to die soon, but Jesus is my resurrection and life, just like He said. I believe, and I'm going to live forever."

Now, he hasn't got to the Cross yet. Suppose Jack dies right then. I doubt many of us would be willing to question whether Jack is in heaven. But let's think this through. If he lives another hour, what am I going to tell him? Well, he's read about seven signs; I'm going to give him the eighth one. "*Jack, there's more. Jesus went up to Jerusalem, and spent time preparing his disciples, and then the religious rulers arrested him, and they had the Romans kill Him, just like He said they would. But He's God's Son, and He's perfect, so when He died, He took our sin on Himself and paid the death penalty for it. Jack, He paid for our sins! And three days later, He rose from the dead just like He said He would. He appeared to His disciples, and talked with them and taught them and even sat and ate with them.*" This is the next part in John's story, so it's where we're going next.

And this is what I would hope to persuade you of: whether you think Jack is saved on the basis of believing John 1-11 or not, that you would move on and give him the rest of the story. That you would be faithful to John's presentation of the message, regardless of your personal theories about exactly what the bare minimum message might be.

Which brings me to the second reason that our question is irrelevant: Scripture just doesn't ever say "Here's the bare minimum message: \_\_\_\_\_," and give it. Now, I'm aware that some folks want to say that 1 Corinthians 15 does give the essential message, or Romans 10 does, or Acts 16:31, or whatever. I don't have time in five minutes to address all those passages, but I will say, I've looked, and none of these passages even claims that it gives a *sufficient* message, let alone that it's giving the bare minimum. That's a claim that we bring to the text, not something the text claims for itself.

Don't get me wrong: I enjoy a little speculation as much as the next theology geek—but if Scripture doesn't answer the question, why fight seriously about it? The tragedy on this question is not the tragedy of the so-called "crossless gospel." It's the tragedy of

brothers anathematizing each other over different answers to a question Scripture never addresses, all the while failing to be faithful to what Scripture *has* said.

Now in contrast to some of these other passages that are set forth, John's stated purpose *does* entail presenting a sufficient message, so we know all the essentials will be included. And of course John includes the cross and resurrection, and therefore so should we. But does John ever tell us "The cross and resurrection are essential, but you can dispense with the cleansing of the temple if you're in a hurry"? He does not. He *does* show us Peter and the other disciples, who very clearly were born again and just as clearly actively disbelieved in the cross and the resurrection. He *does not* attach a warning label: "That was then, buddy. YOU have to believe in the cross, or you're toast." He also *does not* say that it's safe to skip it. And he spends 10 chapters out of 21 on the cross and resurrection account: Jesus first prepares His disciples—and John prepares his readers—for the event and its implications, the event itself occurs, and Jesus teaches them in its aftermath as well. I'd say that makes it pretty important, and I'm not about to skip it. Neither, by the way, is Zane Hodges. If you look at the second part of his much-maligned article "How to Lead People to Christ," you'll find these words:

Let's suppose I have been talking to "Ralph," an unsaved young man. I have given him the gospel about the death and resurrection of Christ. I have emphasized the point that the Lord Jesus, by His death on the cross, has completely satisfied God in regard to Ralph's sins. Christ has paid for all the sins Ralph would ever commit from the day of his birth to the day of his death. Thus Jesus has purchased Ralph's way to heaven.

He goes on to discuss eternal life with "Ralph." I don't think anybody's actually leaving the cross out of their presentations. Of course we can speculate about whether, if we did, the person would still be saved. But we should be very cautious about attaching a lot of importance to the discussion, for the very good reason that it's idle speculation—nobody's actually going to *try* it. So why start slinging heresy charges over it?

In closing, I'd like to take a shot at the mentality that I think is behind all this bare-minimum-hunting. Culturally, we like salesmanship evangelism: quick-hit, one-shot, decision-based. Get a prospect in your sights, BOOM, done, move on to the next one. To do that, we need a tiny little gospel message that will fit in a fortune cookie. So we go through the Scriptures with a fine sieve, looking for one, and we get into fights about who's got it right and who doesn't.

But Scripture simply doesn't approach evangelism that way. An acquaintance of mine likes to say, "It's more like harvesting than hunting." God's evangelism is 21 chapters long and it starts with Creation. From what we know about Paul's evangelism, it also starts with Creation. If someone's never heard any of this before, it's gonna take a while to walk them through it. So I think our unbiblical picture of evangelism as a whole has borne bitter fruit in theological disputes about all the wrong things, at the expense of Scripture's priorities.