

# THE WORD OF LIFE

*A Theology of John's Gospel*

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true, but have been taken prisoner by falsehood and are now forced to live on the basis of untruth. The enslaving power of sin might be compared to addiction, where a chemical distorts the way people see reality and overpowers their will, taking away the freedom to do something other than what the addiction demands. The relationship to the chemical becomes the primary relationship, damaging all other relationships. And the irony is that those who are being enslaved have the illusion that they are free to live as they choose.

The power of sin, in John's Gospel, is similar. The people who meet Jesus insist that they are free, and if this is true, then they have no need of the freedom he offers. If Jesus persists in offering them freedom, then they are bound to reject him because they know he cannot be telling them the truth. Jesus says that "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36), but his listeners do not believe this. Their unbelief drives their actions, so that by the end of the chapter they are ready to stone Jesus. Rejecting the offer of freedom reveals the depth of their bondage.

### The Problem of Evil

Enslavement to sin brings us close to another aspect of the human condition, which is oppression by the power of evil. Much of the Gospel focuses on the way people interact with Jesus and each other, yet behind the scenes is another power, which is hostile to God and seeks to exert its influence over the world. John assumes that human beings are accountable for their own unbelief and actions. Yet he also recognizes that there are dimensions of evil that go beyond the merely human. To understand the world and its people, therefore, we must explore the role of this sinister force.

### *Satan*

John calls this transcendent power of evil Satan (13:27), the devil (13:2), the evil one (17:15), and the ruler of this world (12:31). In the other gospels the devil sometimes appears in vivid personified form, tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread, to cast himself down from the temple, or to gain worldly power by worshipping him (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Evil spirits seize control of people, and Jesus performs exorcisms to liberate them from de-

monic power (Matt. 8:28-34; Mark 3:22-27; Luke 9:37-43). In John, however, the devil is not fully personified. He lurks in the shadows, carrying out his designs through human agents. This does not exempt people from responsibility for their actions. John recognizes that there is a power that transcends human sin and aligns itself with human sin in opposition to God. People have a will of their own, but Satan bends it toward his own ends. Jesus tells a group of hostile listeners, who seek to kill him, that "your will" is to do what the devil desires (John 8:44). Significantly, John includes no accounts of Jesus casting out demons from those he meets. The single "exorcism" is the crucifixion itself, since that is where Jesus casts out the demonic ruler of the world (12:31; see pp. 117-20).<sup>18</sup>

There are three principal characteristics of Satan's activity in John: The first is deception. The devil is called a liar and the father of lies. The Gospel says that there is no truth in the devil and that when he lies he speaks according to his own nature (8:44). Falsehood is a form of power, for by convincing people to believe a lie the devil can move people to carry out his designs. John assumes that God is true and that Jesus speaks the truth he received from God. By way of contrast, the devil spins a web of deception, seeking to trap people with the idea that Jesus is misleading them and that they do not need the gifts God offers.

Second, the devil is implicated in the world's hatred of God, Jesus, and the Christian community. God loves the world and sent his Son as the expression of his love (3:16). Therefore, those who belong to God love Jesus, whereas those allied with the devil do not (8:42-44). Insofar as the devil rules the world, hatred characterizes his realm. Jesus tells the world the truth about its evil, and the world hates him for it (7:7). And since God is the one who sent Jesus to testify, the world's hatred for Jesus is hatred for God (15:23). Moreover, Jesus called people to faith, and the unbelieving world hates believers too. He tells his followers, "If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world — therefore the world hates you" (15:19).

Third, the devil wields the power of death. He was a murderer from the beginning and seeks the death of those who oppose him. The adversaries of Jesus show the influence of the devil by seeking to kill Jesus for speaking the truth (8:44, 59). Later, Satan instigates the betrayal that leads to Jesus' crucifixion (13:2, 27). When Jesus goes to the garden where he is arrested, he is met by a company of armed troops that serve as the agents of the

ruler of this world (14:30-31; 18:1-3). God may give life through his Word, but the devil seeks victory by bringing about death.

John refers to the devil as the ruler of this world, while recognizing that God is the superior power. God creates and gives life, but Satan does not. Therefore, the devil is an intruder into God's world (12:31; 16:11). The relationship of Satan to God is like that of darkness to light. Light has a power that darkness does not. The evil one cannot overcome the power of God any more than darkness can extinguish light (1:5). In this clash of powers, the devil uses the weaponry of falsehood, hatred, and death, yet Jesus defeats him with truth, love, and life (see pp. 117-20).

At one point Jesus says his opponents have the devil as their father (8:44). This does not imply that some people are created by God and others by Satan. The Gospel assumes that all things come into being by the Word of God, not by some other power (1:3). If people are not created as children of the devil, they become children of the devil by allying themselves with evil in opposition to God. People can become children of light by believing in the light (12:36). By way of contrast, they can become children of the devil by embracing falsehood, hatred, and the desire to impose death on others. John's worldview is not static — a point we will consider further under the question of human freedom below.

The Gospel's pointed reference to the children of the devil appears when Jesus is debating with a group of Jewish people. Historically, this has led some to demonize Jewish people in general and has been used to justify violence against them. This is exactly wrong. The Gospel is clear that Jesus and his opponents are both Jewish; they share the same heritage and are all together in the Jerusalem temple. The passage cannot be used to demonize an ethnic or religious group. More importantly, deception, hatred, and violence are what Jesus opposes. Therefore, those who claim to follow him cannot engage in hatred and violence without turning against Jesus himself. In this passage Jesus engages in a sharp debate, but when it comes to throwing stones, Jesus does not participate (8:59). This passage provides no warrant for violent behavior against those with whom one disagrees.

### *Evil in Action*

Satan's work is manifested in Judas, one of Jesus' disciples. This is sobering for Christian readers because it shows that evil is not confined to the Jew-

ish or Gentile adversaries of Jesus; Satan works even among Jesus' own followers. Judas is first mentioned at the end of the Bread of Life discourse, where Jesus says, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil" (6:70-71). Calling Judas "a devil" points to his propensity for evil without fully identifying him as an agent of "the devil." The Gospel assumes that Judas already is a devil, but it offers no explanation as to how Judas got that way. The evil within him is simply taken as a given. Note that Judas already is a devil, yet Jesus chooses him just as he chooses all twelve disciples to be members of his inner circle. If Judas is a devil, it is not because Jesus deprived him of his favor. Rather, evil is resistant to the graciousness Jesus shows.

One might question whether Judas is in any way representative of the way the power of evil works among human beings, since his role as betrayer is so singular. Yet the Gospel links Judas to the wider circle of people who reject Jesus. The author initially mentions Judas after Jesus has announced that he will give his own flesh for the life of the world, an idea many found difficult to accept. Then the Gospel says that "Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him." After this "many of the disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (6:64, 66). What readers see happening in Judas has similarities to what they see happening in others who turn away. The forces at work in Judas can and do work in others as well.

The devil takes more direct action by designating Judas as the one to betray Jesus. In John's account of the last supper, Judas is a participant in a conflict between transcendent powers. When introducing the supper, John says that God puts all things in the hands of Jesus, who is God's agent. At the same time, the devil puts betrayal into the heart of Judas, who is the agent of the evil one (13:2-3).<sup>19</sup> The encounters between Judas and Jesus at the supper disclose the nature of the conflict. Jesus washes the feet of all his disciples, a gracious action that shows his love for them, yet readers are told that Judas remains unclean. This continued uncleanness points to a hardened resistance to the love Jesus offers (13:11, 10-11). Later, Jesus dips a piece of bread into the dish and gives it to Judas as a way of identifying him as the betrayer. Although giving someone food was a common way to show favor, Satan immediately enters Judas, so that they are united in purpose and action (13:27). Earlier it was said that those whose deeds are evil love darkness, and Satan's ally goes out to do evil under the cover of night (3:19; 13:30).

The scope of Satan's activity widens as Jesus tells the remaining disciples that "the ruler of this world is coming"; then he directs them to get up and depart from the supper (14:30-31). When they finally leave and go to the garden, they are met by Judas and others, who serve as agents of the ruler of this world (see pp. 117-20). Satan is not explicitly mentioned in the remainder of the Gospel, but given what has already been said, readers might detect his handiwork in the scenes leading up to the crucifixion. The devil works through falsehood, and the evangelist has prepared readers to see that the accusations made during Jesus' trial are false. He is charged with doing evil, although he is innocent (18:30, 38); with seditiously making himself a king, although his kingship comes from above (18:37, 19:12); and with unlawfully claiming to be Son of God, although God is the one who sent him (5:19-30; 19:7). By condemning Jesus, his opponents reject the truth he brings, showing that they have come under the influence of falsehood. Moreover, the devil wields power by bringing death, and those who condemn Jesus serve as the agents of death.

### *The Question of Human Freedom*

The Gospel portrays a world that is troubled and complex. People are created for life in relationship with God, yet are separated from God. They have a need for God, yet are resistant to God. Human beings are sinners, who are accountable for their own unbelief and actions, and who need to be reconciled with the God from whom they are estranged. Yet they are also held captive by sin and are oppressed by the powers of evil at work in the world, so that they need to be set free. These tensions and contradictions characterize the human context into which God sends the Son to atone, liberate, and bring life (see pp. 109-23). But given this portrayal of the situation, what can be said of human freedom?

Freedom, in John's Gospel, is freedom for relationship. This freedom to believe is the result of God's action. Faith is not self-generated; it comes from God's encounter with human beings. People are said to thirst and hunger for God, and these images presuppose that people cannot meet their own need for relationship. They are freed to eat and drink — or to believe — when God comes to them in Jesus the living bread and in the Spirit's living water. Similarly, people engulfed in darkness do not have the ability to see. The coming of the light creates the freedom to see and believe.

Human resistance to God also means that God must turn alienation into trust and hatred into love. The Gospel speaks of God drawing people to Jesus and Jesus drawing people to himself (6:44; 12:32). The assumption is that people not only need an opportunity to believe but need a positive reason to relate to God in this way. God calls forth love in human beings by extending love to them through the gift of his Son, who lays down his life for them (3:16). God evokes faith by giving people a Word that can be trusted, the Word that comes in human form to tell the world the truth about itself and about the life that comes from God (12:44-50).

The Gospel also recognizes that some people respond to Jesus with faith and others with unbelief. Interpreters have wondered whether this means that God has decided that some people will believe and that others will not. After all, the Gospel says that those whom God has "given" to Jesus will believe and have eternal life, which might imply that God has decided not to give faith and life to others (6:39, 65; 17:2, 6). Jesus can say that those who are "from God" and belong to his sheep will respond favorably to his word, while others will not (8:47; 10:26). Moreover, at the end of Jesus' public ministry the Gospel says that he performed many signs, yet people did not believe in him. In fact "they could not believe," because he "has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn — and I would heal them," as Isaiah said (12:39-40; cf. Isa. 6:10).<sup>20</sup>

These passages assume that faith comes from God's engagement with human beings, but they do not suggest that God wants some people to reject him. Consider the way the quotation from Isaiah is used. God does not blind people by depriving them of the light. Rather, according to John, people become blind because God gives them the light. This was clear in the story of the man born blind, for as the light of truth shone more brightly, the authorities were less and less able to see it (John 9:1-41). Blindness comes as God gives them the light, and their hearts are hardened as he gives them the truth.

If unbelief is not what God wants, then one might conclude that the difference between belief and unbelief is essentially a human affair. According to this view, God presents the light and truth in Jesus, then leaves it up to people to determine what they want to do with it. This rightly recognizes that the human situation is dynamic rather than static.<sup>21</sup> The Gospel speaks expansively of anyone and everyone who comes to faith, assuming that many can and will believe (3:16, 33, 36; 4:14; 6:48). The author

depicts a context in which people can move from unbelief to faith. Jesus may say that his opponents do not belong to his sheep, yet he continues to call them to faith, which means that their unbelief need not be final (10:26, 38). While recognizing human blindness, Jesus urges people to believe in the light while they have opportunity to do so (12:36). The problem with understanding faith in exclusively human terms is that it does not deal adequately with the depth of human resistance to God or with the way God continues to draw people.

In the end, John's Gospel does not explain why some people believe and others do not. Rather than speculating as to the reason that some refuse to believe, the Gospel focuses on what it would take for them to come to faith. God enables people to see who he is through the light of Jesus. If some become blind, the way for their perception to be altered is, paradoxically, through continued exposure to the light. Similarly, God evokes faith through his Word of truth and love. If some reject him, the way for this to change is by continued encounter with the Word of truth and love, through the work of God's Spirit.

### The World

The dimensions of the human context, which have been considered above, are reflected in John's use of the term *kosmos* or "world."<sup>22</sup> The prologue speaks broadly when saying that the world was brought into being through the Word of God (1:10). In the broadest sense, the world is God's creation. It has a beginning (17:5, 24), and is the sphere in which life is lived. But the Gospel most often focuses on the human world, on the people whom God has made. In many cases the Gospel speaks of the Jewish world. This is the immediate context in which much of Jesus' ministry takes place. He is told to go to Jerusalem to show himself to the world (7:4). When summarizing his activities he says, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together" (18:20). For Jesus, being in the world means being among Jewish people. Yet the Gospel extends this horizon to include other groups in "the world." When Jesus goes to Samaria, to non-Jews, he is acclaimed as "Savior of the World" (4:42). By saying this, the Samaritans show they are part of the world to which Jesus has come. Later, as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, a crowd bearing palm branches welcomes him; and the Pharisees say, "the

world has gone after him" (12:19). The narrator immediately adds, "Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks" (12:20). The Gospel's sense of "the world" includes ever-widening circles that encompass Jews, Samaritans, and Greeks.

This "world" to which Jesus comes is also alienated from the God who made it. This is evident in the resistance Jesus encounters from his Jewish opponents. Before going to Jerusalem, Jesus says that the world hates him because he testifies that its works are evil (7:7). After he arrives, he tells the Pharisees who reject his testimony, "you are from this world, I am not of this world," and he warns them of the consequences of sin (8:23). Some Jews persecute Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, and Jesus later says that this exemplifies "the world's" animosity toward him and his followers (5:16; 15:18-20). Yet the Gospel does not limit the issue of sin to any one group of people.<sup>23</sup> As we noted earlier, Nicodemus is a Jew and a Pharisee, but he reflects tendencies that are true of "the world" and "human beings" (*anthrōpoi*) more broadly (2:23-25; 3:1-2, 16-21). Jesus came into the world to bear witness to the truth, and the truth is rejected by Pilate the Roman governor as well as by Jesus' Jewish opponents (18:37-38; 19:16). All of them come under judgment during Jesus' trial (see pp. 70-72). Sin is a human problem.

Similarly, the power of evil is at work throughout the human world. The devil is active among Jesus' Jewish opponents, as well as in Judas, who is one of Jesus' own followers (8:44; 13:2, 27). Before the passion, Jesus expands the scope of the issue still further when he speaks of the evil one as "the ruler of this world," who is coming (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). And as his opponents come to arrest him, readers find that they include Judas his erstwhile disciple, as well as Jewish police and Roman soldiers (18:3). The influence of the evil one is not limited to one group.

John's ominous portrayal of "the world" gives depth to his understanding of the love of God and the work of Jesus. The "world" in John's Gospel is not characterized by soft summer breezes and the graceful light of dawn, by meadows filled with flowers or gentle waves upon the shore. It requires little effort to love a world like that. But in John's Gospel God loves the world that hates him; he gives his Son for the world that rejects him. He offers his love to a world estranged from him in order to overcome its hostility and bring the world back into relationship with its Creator (3:16).