

You Have Crossed Over From Death to Life

John 5:19-24 • 2021-11-07



Jerry Hartfield is unique among murder cases. He was charged with murder in 1977. But he ended up escaping from the death penalty. Only he did it without a trial and without anyone else confessing to the crime. His release from prison was rather unique. Due to circumstances with the jury, he won an appeal which called for a retrial of his case. He escaped the death penalty. But something happened. Or rather, nothing happened. By way of what seemed like a miscommunication between the judges, the lawyers, and the governor no further trial took place. The judges and lawyers were all tossing aside their responsibilities. Hartfield was left in jail without a trial. And the "right to a speedy trial" became 35 years of waiting. They all thought Hartfield was someone else's problem. So, instead of giving him a new trial or releasing him, they forgot him in prison. The intellectually disabled man did not know how to plead his own case, so he spent 35 years in prison waiting for his trial. But the trial never came. He made friends with someone who was able to help his voice be heard. And the man who maintained his innocence for 40 years was finally released. Personally, it sounds to me like he was far beyond a reasonable doubt an innocent man. Nonetheless, if he hadn't won the original appeal in 1980, he would have potentially faced the death penalty. But it took him about four decades to finally be freed for a crime for which he was never duly convicted.

All of us will have our day in court. Our day of trial won't be forgotten or overlooked. We will be called to stand before our judge. And he will give us a speedy trial. And it won't matter whether we consider ourselves guilty or innocent. That judge won't make any mistakes. We will find out if we get life or death. We read in Malachi earlier about the picture of fiery judgment on every sinner. There simply is no escape when the day of judgment comes. And it doesn't matter whether you are innocent or guilty of murder. Our judge will hold us accountable for every deed, good or bad. How will you stand on the day of judgment? Today we see how we don't have to wait to find out. Our judge has already declared the verdict for us. So, when our day in court comes before our Maker and our God, we know where we stand. Let's take a look at what he says as we read from John 5.

The first order of business is finding out who our judge is. Poor Jerry Hartfield couldn't get an answer to that question for his case. But we have a clear answer. We read in John chapter 5 Jesus saying that he is equal to God the Father. His claim to be equal with God enraged his enemies so much that they wanted to kill him. But Jesus defended his claim to be divine. *"Jesus answered them directly, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing. Indeed, the Son does exactly what the Father does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he is doing."*

Jesus wasn't saying that he is less than the Father. Rather he is saying that he and the Father are one. He and the Father share the exact same divine will. Whatever God the Father does and wills, the Son wills and does. Mankind was created to be like God. Man and woman were made in his image and likeness in order to do what God desired. They shared in God's holiness. But Jesus is uncreated. He doesn't just bear God's likeness. He is the exact representation of God's being. What God the Father wills is precisely what Jesus also wills. This is the mystery of the incarnation. Jesus, though being in very nature God, humbled himself and took on human flesh. And even though the Son humbled himself and veiled his glory, he remained true God. When Jesus taught, did miracles, and revealed his glory to the people, he showed that he is one with the Father, true God. When he drove out demons, he did the work of God. When he showed his power over the forces of nature, he showed he is true God.

But Jesus says all those signs and miracles were really just the beginning. He made it clear that they would have further proof that he is true God. *"And he will show him even greater works than these so that you will be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to those he wishes."* It is one thing to heal the sick and make the blind see. But it is another to raise dead people to life. The enemies of Christ would see this power and authority as Jesus raised a young girl, a boy, and a man who was already four days dead. Ultimately, he would show his glory by himself rising from death. When his enemies challenged him for taking on the authority of God, Jesus said he would prove his authority as the Son of God by raising himself from death. Only God has such power. The man Jesus is just who he claimed to be: true God.

As true God Jesus is the one who rightly bears the title judge of the world. He will bring all this world into his courtroom of justice. He will be the one who gets to pronounce the verdict. All those who claim Jesus was merely a good teacher or a nice man fail to recognize his grand claim as judge of the world. When the day comes, and the living and glorious Jesus stands to judge all the world they will be shocked. They will see him as the one who rose from death and has returned in glory as true God and judge of all.

As our divine judge he demands divine honor. You know, one of the best ways to get in trouble in the courtroom is to show contempt for the court and to disrespect the person who is serving as the judge. That's why judges will often wear robes and sit in a high position. It indicates their position of honor and respect as the judge. Jesus' claim to be

true God is validated by the deeds and signs he did. He bears the characteristics of God since he is everlasting, all-knowing, all-present, and all powerful. But there is one more reason you have to acknowledge Jesus is true God. It has to do with his position as our judge. Just as we see in the visions in the book of Revelation Jesus is worshipped and honored as equal to the Father. The divine judge is due divine honor. *"...All should honor the Son just as they honor the Father."*

So, how will you stand before the judge of all when the day comes? Today we stand in symbolic honor as we gather for worship and read the words of the gospel. We make gestures throughout our life to honor the Son. But do our acts of honor earn us a better verdict on the last day? It doesn't matter how much you try to give the judge honor. An honorable judge won't change his verdict for good behavior. He will still give a just verdict against a sinner. And when you come into your judge's divine courtroom, and you are brought to account, he will not make a mistake. He sees every fault. He sees every evil desire in your heart that has ever taken hold. He is aware of all the selfish ways you ignored the plight of others. He is aware of all the times you put yourself first and honored yourself above your God. Consider how this judge ought to pronounce your verdict on the last day! He is the same one who says, "whoever hates his brother or says, 'you fool,' will be in danger of the fires of hell." He isn't a judge who will eventually let you go without a trial.

But the amazing part about this judge is that although he remains holy and just, the trial won't go as we deserve. *"Amen, Amen, I tell you: Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He is not going to come into judgment but has crossed over from death to life."*

The picture Jesus gives is *"you have crossed over from death to life."* The words he uses to describe our new position are the same that the Greek authors of the New Testament use to describe crossing over a ravine or over a sea. You've gone from one side to the other. Your default status was death. That's the side you were born on and remained on with the curse of sin. You were guilty before God. The judge had every reason to condemn you for your sin. But you have crossed the line, crossed the gap, and are now standing safe on the shore of forgiveness. Scripture also describes us as having been taken out of darkness and into light. We are described as having been brought from the dominion of evil to the dominion of the Son. The change that took place is described as like the healing Jesus gave. As surely as he made the blind see, he has opened your eyes to see the light of his good news. And as surely as Jesus made the dead alive, he has given you a new life. Take comfort in this great picture, *"You have crossed over from death to life!"*

The gap between life and death is one which we never could have crossed by our own efforts. *"All have sinned, all fall short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3). Our efforts at crossing from death to life will always fail us. Instead the Son of God crossed over to us. He made the bridge for our crossing. He crossed from life to death. He came down from the glory he shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit and entered this world of death. And so that you would not come into judgment he took that judgment as your substitute. Sin is horrible and has terrible consequences. It brings a curse and the just judgment of a holy God. But the Father willed that his Son come to this world to rescue sinners. And just as the Father willed it, the Son also willed it and acted. He came to suffer the penalty and die in your place. He truly crossed over from life into death and bridged the gap between God and all mankind.

And how do we cross that bridge into life? *"Anyone who hears my word and believes has eternal life."* It is not a bridge crossed by those who try to be holy and do their best to bear God's image. It is a bridge crossed by fallen sinners. It is crossed apart from works and by faith alone. And sinners can only cross it through hearing the gospel and trusting in their God.

You don't have to wait 35 years to finally find out what is going to happen with you. You have your divine judge telling you today, *"You are not going to come into judgment."* You won't stand on judgment day by your own record. You can't argue your case. But you hear, listen, and live. You escape judgment. It is by the record of Jesus the Son. It is by faith in the gospel that you are spared from the just punishment over sin.

When Jerry Hartfield was released from prison it wasn't because of any new trial. It wasn't because he served any sentence. He never had to face any retrial. It will be the same for us. Only it won't be due to a clerical error or bad practice on the part of any judge. We get to avoid any jail time and all charges will immediately be dismissed by the judge. It's already done. God did not let your case slide. He dealt with it through his Son. He says you are declared innocent through Jesus Christ.

It is encouraging to hear that the sad story of Jerry Hartfield does have a happy ending. He crossed over from death to life. And he didn't do it by evading the death penalty. He didn't do it by waiting out until the courts discovered their mistake. He did it by hearing and believing in the one who brought him across. He says that while in prison he came to learn about Jesus. Learning about Jesus and coming to faith in him was the greatest thing that happened. He crossed over from death to life. How? He heard. He believed. He has eternal life. And he will never be put on trial again because of Jesus. It's the same for all who believe. They have crossed over from death to life.

