

## **John 3:22-36**

### **"He Must Increase"**

Imago Dei Church | Sunday AM | 2 Services | 7/15/2018

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This is the third week we've been in John 3. Two weeks ago, we looked at Jesus' interactions with a man names Nicodemus, who was trying to figure out how Jesus' ministry fit into his own expectations for how God was going to save his people.

And then last week we looked at the Gospel writer's own reflections on this encounter. John told us that Jesus' saving work was an outflow of God's love for sinners like you and me.

In the text we're looking at today, we're going to see a **contrast between the ministries** of John the Baptist and Jesus that is **meant to highlight the centrality of Jesus** in God's redemptive plan.

This contrast was introduced all the way back in 1:8: **"He [John] was not the light, but came to bare witness about the light."**

John the Baptist is not the point of the story. Jesus is. John was simply pointing to him.

If we go ahead and look at the beginning of our text today (3:22), John the Gospel-writer (not the Baptist)

continues to remind us not to confuse the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist.

**John 3:22–24 (DO NOT READ)**

[22] After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. [23] John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized [24] (for John had not yet been put in prison).

After leaving Jerusalem and his interaction with Nicodemus, Jesus goes into the countryside with his disciples.

While they are there, many people come to him and want to be baptized.

(The beginning of John 4 clarifies for us that Jesus himself isn't the one who actually performs the baptisms, but he and his followers seem to be welcoming those who want to follow him in baptism.)

At the same time, verse 23 tells us, John has been a little farther north in Aenon, likewise baptizing people who are responding to his call to repent and prepare for God's kingdom.

And although it's not the main point of the text, it's helpful to note that John seems to need a lot of water to perform his baptisms—reinforcing the fact

that the word baptize literally means “to immerse”—something that requires lots of water!

In verse 24, the Gospel writer turns into **Captain Obvious** and lets us know that John was able to baptize because he has not been imprisoned yet—thanks!

The real point seems to be that this was an early point in Jesus’ ministry, since the other Gospels show that John was arrested after Jesus has begun his ministry in Galilee later on (Mark 1:14).

So the contrast is set up. We have Jesus baptizing over here, and John baptizing over here.

Is this a “**choose your own adventure**” kind of thing? Are they going to clash? What’s the deal?

What I’d like us to do in the rest of these verses is to take each in turn and try to understand what John is trying to show us about each of their ministries.

## **1. JOHN’S MINISTRY: POINTING TO THE SUPREMACY OF THE SAVIOR (JOHN 3:25-30)**

### **John 3:25–30**

[25] Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. [26] And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” [27] John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. [28] You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ [29] The one who

has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. [30] He must increase, but I must decrease.”

John the Baptists ministry can be summed up as “Pointing to the Supremacy of the Savior”—and it’s presented to us through a **series of minor conflicts**.

While they are baptizing people, one of the Jews comes up to John’s disciples and begins to question them about purification.

It seems likely that they are confused as to **what role, exactly, John’s baptism plays in the ritual life of a good Jew**. (It was similar to some of the purification laws, but also different.)

Effectively, this is a **question about the nature of John’s ministry**. ‘This John guy you’re following—what’s his deal?’

After leaving the discussion with the unnamed Jew, **John’s disciples continue to reflect** on their conversation, and it seems it **leads them to consider the effect of Jesus baptizing** as well.

[26] “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.”

**Their question isn’t simply one of inquiry**. It’s frustration.

They've left everything to follow John.

They've defended John in conversations like the one with this Jew.

But for what?

Sure, people were following them, but not as many as were going after Jesus.

These guys **aren't simply intrigued by Jesus' success**. They're upset by it. Yeah, they've got success, but not as much success as the new guy.

John's disciples are plagued by the sin of covetousness. **Covetousness is an especially evil and twisted sin, and it's one that we all feel at one time or another when we resent the success of others and their exaltation above our own perceived self-worth.**

### Plantiga

"Envy is resentment of someone else's good, plus the itch to despoil her of it. ... Envy is pure evil, as toxic and sickening to the envier as to everybody else. ... Envy poisons the envier, introducing gangrene into his own soul. ... Envy is against all virtues and against all goodnesses" (169ff).

### Sauls

"Envy is the opposite of love because it does not rejoice with those who rejoice or mourn with those who mourn. Instead, envy, in its sick and sinister way, rejoices when others mourn and mourns when others rejoice. ... The underlying cause of envy is pride, along with its close cousin, the rival spirit" (92).

**Lewis**

"Pride is essentially competitive ... [It] gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next [person]. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. ... It's the pleasure of being above all the rest."

This was the error of John's disciples. They're fundamental approach to their calling was off-base, but John's was not.

So in his response he first reminds his followers of a general truth [27]—**"A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."**

His followers had lost sight of the fact that his role in this whole deal is a gift from God and a part of God's good plan. Any way in which John is "special" is something he did not deserve, and he did not earn. God had given it to him in his wisdom and in his grace.

**When we keep in mind that everything we have and any role we get to play in God's kingdom is a gift, we are freed from the fear of losing it and the despair of seeing it change or fade.**

John knew that whatever his role was in the divine plan, it was God's to give and God's to take away. **"Blessed me the name of the Lord,"** as Job would say.

He also reminds his followers that he knew this was coming all along. "[28] You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'" 'I been tryna tella ya!' 'I told you so!' 'Why are you surprised?!'

So John uses an analogy [29] to illustrate his perspective:

[29] The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

On the face of it, this is a simple example. The wedding is about the bride and the groom, not the best man. If the wedding becomes about the best man, something's gone terribly wrong.

The best man, in fact, really has one job: make the groom look good! And if he can do that, he's happy.

John says, I'm the best man. My joy is in seeing the groom (Jesus) look good.

At the same time, though, there's something going on underneath the surface with this analogy.

Surely John the Baptist knows as he is speaking that Israel herself has been depicted (OT) as the Lord's bride whom he will come to rescue and redeem.

**Isaiah 62:4-5**

[4] You shall no more be termed Forsaken,

and your land shall no more be termed Desolate,  
 but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
 and your land Married;  
 for the LORD delights in you,  
 and your land shall be married.  
 [5] For as a young man marries a young woman,  
 so shall your sons marry you,  
 and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
 so shall your God rejoice over you. (ESV)

**Jeremiah 2:2**

[2] "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD,  
 "I remember the devotion of your youth,  
 your love as a bride,  
 how you followed me in the wilderness,  
 in a land not sown. (ESV)

Even in the story of Hosea, Israel is depicted as a prostituting, unfaithful, unworthy spouse, yet still God comes to rescue and redeem as her loving groom (Hosea 1-3).

Over and over and over again, God is the great groom who comes for his Bride.

Surely John the Baptist knew this! — But there's more...

John the Gospel writer surely knew, writing at the end of his life, that the Church was known as the bride of Christ!

This simple analogy is packed with meaning. John is telling us that in Jesus, the long-awaited groom has

shown up, and in seeing his redemption, John's delight would be complete.

So John can summarize his perspective with two simple statements in v. 30: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

John's ministry was not about making his name great or increasing his place in the divine story. It was about pointing to the supremacy of the Savior—the **bridegroom who had come to lay down his life in order to rescue and redeem his bride.**

When that groom showed up and stole the spotlight, John couldn't have been more excited.

(APP) It's helpful to consider who has "the good life" in this passage. John's followers have all the ambition, but none of the joy because their ambition was selfish and self-centered. When our ambition is centered on self, joy will always be elusive. Even "ministry" can be deceptively self-centered. And the ruse is easy to maintain until all the glory goes to the guy down the street.

### Sauls

"I often want God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, but with a caveat—that his kingdom come through me more than it does through others" (96).

But if like John our purpose, ambition, and joy are wrapped up not in the advancement of self but in the exaltation of the supreme Savior, our joy is certain and it is full—regardless of who Christ uses to get his glory!

What part of your life is wrapped up in selfish ambition rather than in seeing the groom receive the glory that he's due? What might it look like to surrender that to God's good plan?

### Sauls

"Our souls are not wired for celebrity or for ego-inflating self-advancement. We are not made to stand on pedestals. Rather, we are made to decrease, to become less, to make space for all the glory and honor and applause to go to...King Jesus" (99).

So that's John's ministry. What about Jesus'?

## 2. JESUS' MINISTRY: PERFECTLY REVEALING GOD TO THE WORLD (JOHN 3:31-36)

### John 3:31-36 (DO NOT READ)

[31] He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. [32] He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. [33] Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. [34] For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. [35] The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. [36] Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

As Tony mentioned last week, the original Greek writings would not have had quotation marks, so it's again a little tricky to know where John the Baptist stops talking and where John the Gospel writer begins.

But it seems most likely that the Baptist's words end in verse 30. That means that overall chapter 3 follows a simple pattern of story(Nic)—commentary(3:16ff)—story(John the Baptist)—commentary(3:31ff).

John returns to a theme he has introduced earlier in the chapter. When talking with Nicodemus, **Jesus rebuked Nic for not understanding** some basic spiritual truths. He tells Nic that he's come from heaven to make known the deep things of God, yet Nic can't even seem to understand the basics.

Jesus is the only person in history who has actually descended from heaven for the purpose of making known the fullness of God. No one else compares.

Here, instead of contrasting Jesus with a skeptical but inquiring Pharisee, he contrasts Jesus with John the Baptist.

I mean, **if anyone is able to compare, surely it's the man Jesus himself said was the greatest man who ever lived, right (Matt. 11:11)?**

Wrong! Look what John says: "[31] He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all."

John contrasts Jesus and John according to their origin, their nature, their greatness, and even their ministry.

**Origin**—John is "of the earth" while Jesus "comes from heaven"

**Nature**—John "belongs to the earth" while Jesus is "from above"

**Greatness**—Jesus is "above all"

**Ministry**—John's ministry is limited to earthly things, isn't it? John can only "speak in an earthly way."

He's not talking about knowing angelic languages here. He's saying that John's ministry in God's plan is still severely limited.

Yes, John was definitely sent by God, but he cannot reveal the wisdom of heaven (as Jesus can),  
**he cannot effect the new birth and the water-spirit renewal** (as Jesus can), and  
**he cannot baptize with the Holy Spirit, but only water.** That was one of the fundamental contrasts John the Baptist himself drew between him and Jesus (John 1:33; Luke 3:16; Mark 1:8)!

Jesus alone is this one from above, and vv. 32-35 tell us what exactly the nature of his ministry is (6 features of Jesus’ ministry).

1. **First-Hand (32a)** — “[32] He bears witness to what he has seen and heard,”
2. **Polarizing (32b-33a)** — “no one receives his testimony. [33] Whoever receives his testimony...”
3. **Representative (33-34a)** — “[33] Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. [34] For he whom God has sent utters the words of God,”

Carson: “Jesus so completely says and does all that God says and does, and only what God says and does (e.g. 5:19–30; 6:37–40; 8:29), that to believe Jesus is to believe God. Conversely, not to believe Jesus is to call God a liar (cf. 12:44–50; 1 Jn. 5:10)” (213).

4. **Spirit-Filled (34)** — “for he gives the Spirit without measure.”

The “he” here is God, who sends Christ as his representative. And the one to whom he is giving the Spirit without measure is specifically the messenger, Jesus.

Which means that as Jesus comes and speaks the words of God—he does so perfectly—guided by the fullness of the Holy Spirit given to him by his Father.

Jesus has a divine origin, a divine commission, and a divine helper. His representation of God to the world is perfect and complete.

**Hebrews 1:1-3a**

[1] Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [2] but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. [3] He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

**5. Fueled by love (35a) — "The Father loves the Son"**

Some have argued that to see the cross as a sacrifice for our sin amounts to divine child-abuse, but John tells us that the Father's sending of the Son is fueled by his intense love for the Son.

Jesus does not speak the words of God begrudgingly or because he is forced. The relationship between the Father and the Son is of intense, personal, intimate love.

**6. Authoritative (35b) — "... and has given all things into his hand."**

**CONCLUSION**

Verse 36 forces us to consider our response to this ministry.

If Jesus does perfectly reveal the Father, what does that tell us?

It tells us that...

1. ...we are desperately separated from God in such a way that if we are going to be able to know God, God himself is going to have to come to us in the person of his Son.
2. ... God loves us enough to actually come to us.
3. ...our sin is severe enough that when God comes, he has to deal with it through his own death on a cross.
4. ...because he has loved us in this way, we must receive him if we are going to know God's love forever, starting now.

**[36] Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life;** — Christ has come as the great messenger from God. As the perfect messenger and as the Son of God, to believe in him is to trust God himself and to experience eternal life.

***"has eternal life"*** — now and forever

This belief is not simply mental agreement, though.

***"believe" – "receive" – "obey"*** — together these words capture what Jesus calls us to.

He's not simply inviting us to appreciate what he's done; he's calling us to turn away from our rejection of God and agree with, follow, and surrender to the one who has been had "all things" given into his hands.

**The call to receive him is less an offer to be accepted or rejected and more of a summons, a command, and a warning to be heeded and obeyed.**

It beckons us to take hold of the gift of life and flee the judgement that is rightfully ours. That's why John concludes...

**"whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."** — we are already under God's wrath because of our sinfulness.

**Carson:** "God's wrath is not some impersonal principle of retribution, but the personal response of a holy God who comes to his own world, sadly fallen into rebellion, and finds few who want anything to do with him. Such people are 'condemned already' (cf. v. 18)" (214).

The question is not whether you deserve wrath. It's whether you will receive the rescue that has been provided.