

He Must Increase: Our Chief End Is to Glorify God

John 3:22–36

We wrap up John 3 today. But before we read the entire sermon text, look down at one verse:

v 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.

John is using an illustration drawn from Jewish wedding customs. The friend of the bridegroom—what we would call the best man—had a more significant role than what we see in our culture. He served as a legal witness. His job was to ensure that everything was done decently, in order, and according to the requirements of the covenant so that the marriage was fully valid. He stood by, listened for the bridegroom's voice — he heard the words as the covenant was entered, and then rejoiced when the marriage was sealed and all its blessings secured.

That is the picture John applies to himself. After the encounter with Nicodemus, the Baptist's disciples get in a dust-up over baptism. John seizes the moment to make his position clear: "I am the friend of the Bridegroom." Jesus is the Bridegroom who has come to claim His bride, the ransomed Church. John is the friend who stands, hears the Bridegroom's voice, and rejoices that the covenant work of redemption is underway.

In Ch 1, the Baptist heralded Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In Ch 2, at the wedding in Cana, we are given a sign hinting that ritual washing is giving way to atoning blood. Now the Bridegroom, the Son of Man, has declared that He has come so that His people should not perish but have everlasting life. The bridegroom will conquer what produces their death. John's joy is complete because he hears the Bridegroom's voice at the wedding, and in the lamp-lit room with Nicodemus, and knows the Bridegroom is claiming His bride. With that in mind, let us read the text.

John 3:22–36 — 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 baptized²⁴ (for John had not yet been put in prison).

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

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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.”

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.

PRAY — Lord, incline our hearts to your Word. Turn our eyes from looking at worthless things; turn our minds from distraction by what does not endure and cannot matter; Give us life in your ways, to eternal glory of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

In **vv 22–24**, sometime after this critical encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus and his disciples go into the Judean countryside and are baptizing. We know from Ch 4 that it was the disciples who were doing the actual dunking under the authority of Jesus. Jesus himself was not doing the baptizing. And the Baptist is also baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there's water there. People are coming out to be baptized. John the Apostle notes that this is before the Baptist was put in prison. The ministry of the Baptist only lasted about six months, so this is all still rather fresh and new, but the word is out.

What sort of baptism is being done under the authority of Jesus and John? It's not believers baptism. That's not yet instituted. It's a Jewish baptism of ritual cleansing. It runs parallel, if you will, to the sacrificial system. As they brought bulls and goats to feasts to sacrifice for sins, there is a baptism ritual for purification. That's likely what we see here.

In **v 25** some dispute arises about this, and the context indicates that there is some territorialism going on. The Baptist's followers say 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.” We've got the franchise out here! What are you gonna do about this?

As a personal thought, I can't help but think that the Baptist's heart must be broken over the disorientation of those whom he has been discipling. His entire reason for being on the earth is to point people to Christ and declare that this is the promised Messiah. He is the one that God has promised. And his own disciples have missed that. He is about to launch into a powerful correction of their misplaced loyalty. Before we get there, let's just note the human tendency to be disoriented to the things of God — and most of it is rooted in pride.

To paraphrase Richard Owen Roberts, we are prone to have a higher view of ourselves than is ordinate, and a lower view of the exalted Christ than is necessary. To wit: "Listen now, you rebels. Must we bring forth water out of this rock?" That breathtaking hubris cost Moses everything he worked for his whole life. Uzzah reaches out to steady the Ark of the Covenant, representing the dwelling place of God on earth— his very throne. Uzzah had good intentions, yet was a sinner made of dust. When he presumed he was clean enough to touch God, it cost him his life. Not only are we prone to be prideful in ourselves, we are prone to treat those through whom God is working as though they are the star of the show. We saw that last year when we went through 1st Corinthians and have this dividing up church members between those who follow Paul and those who follow Apollos. Here we have the followers of the Baptist—none greater born among women— and they are competitively exalting the Baptist over the One whom the Baptist came to exalt.

John does not fall into the pride trap that Moses fell into. He does not mistake himself as being on par with Jesus and makes that very clear. But his followers, with a misplaced sense of loyalty, want to protect his franchise so that Jesus does not horn in on their business. His response lays a foundational Christology that redirects them away from him to Christ — all of it rooted in who the eternal Messiah is, versus a man made out of dust.

John's answer begins in v 27 with a simple truth: **A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.** Everything—ministry, influence, disciples, success— these are gifts from above. John refuses to cling to what was never his to hold. Instead he reorients his followers to the One who is from above, the One who is above all, the true Bridegroom whose voice is filling the land. See why Christ leaves no room for competition and no room for pride.

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He must increase— it must happen by John pointing away from himself to Christ, just as we must do. We are never to grasp for attention or an “attaboy” if God works through us. He does not share his glory. And it “**must**” happen because it is the determined will of God. Because the Son of Man humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient to death, God the Father has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name. Jesus must increase. At his name every knee will bow. He must increase, but I must decrease, says the Baptist. He was never the star of the show. His ministry is short and to the point. It is not merely that he won’t step into the spotlight in an aggressive way, but that he will be very aware, very careful that he is not the focus so that there is no possibility for confusion. And the second part of the phrase does not only apply to John, but is a universal law for every created thing. We are to decrease. We are to be careful that we attract no attention to ourselves.

Jesus comes from above, and is the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of his nature. He upholds the universe by the word of his power. He **must** increase as the Father has determined, exalting him to the highest place. He came as a suffering servant at his first advent and rose as the conquering King. Everyone and everything that is created— stuff made of the earth— must decrease in subjection to the One who is from above, who created all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things must decrease because they were created through him and for him. Every knee will bow because every knee must bow. There will be no raised fists before him.

In shocking contrast to the exalted Christ, we see debasement of sin in v 32. The prologue told us that he came to his own, but his own people did not receive him. It is repeated again here in 32. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. How can they not see and understand who Christ is? They are hardened in sin and blind to perceive because of that sin. This is how catastrophic the fall was, and what it did to our hearts and minds. Our sinful nature is so comprehensive and so corrupt that God will have to overcome our blindness and overcome our rebellion so that we will bow before him. As we have seen, one thing is sure: we will ultimately bow before him. The only question is whether or not we will bow before him as his child in the multitude of his mercies, or be brought low before him who is the righteous judge, executing condemnation on those who remained in rebellion. But as God opens blind eyes, we will receive him and understand that God is true.

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As we move into a new community two weeks from today, the baton of spiritual responsibility passes to us. It is now our responsibility to pray for God to intervene in the lives of those who to this point have not received the testimony of Christ. It is our job to proclaim his gospel. So let's take it seriously, and seek God, who alone causes dead hearts to live. Invitations, flyers, building touchups— these will never take out a heart of stone or overcome spiritual blindness. They are tools that can help us make a connection. But we must be diligent in the ordinary means of grace. However much we have learned to pray, let us grow more mature and pray more fervently that Christ receive the glory he is worthy of. Whatever degree we may have been faithful to proclaim the gospel in the past, let us redouble our efforts. God does make dead hearts live, so let us be faithful in the means of grace that he has appointed to us.

There are those in whom God does overcome the blindness. **They** receive the testimony of the Son, and they confess that God is true. In vv 34–36 John closes with a beautiful summary of the Gospel. Jesus has the unique authority of the One whom God has sent. He is the incarnate Word who speaks the inerrant word.

He gives the unlimited gift of the Spirit, unlike all previous prophets. The Spirit came to dwell on Christ, and he will give the Spirit fully to every believer at Pentecost. All previous prophets were limited in some way in the anointing of the Spirit they experienced. Christ is above all of them, and he forever occupies the permanent office of Prophet in the fullness of the Spirit.

The Father loves the Son, and has given everything into his hand. In his permanent office as King, he determines the final, dividing line of eternal life or abiding wrath. The King will return and judge the world. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

How does one enter into eternal life in the Son so that his sins are paid by the lifted-up Son of Man? Through faith in Jesus. In his office of Priest, he makes atonement for the sin of those who come to him in faith. And notice the present tense: Whoever believes in the Son has, **right now**, present tense, and will forever have, eternal life in Christ. We cannot lose the life that Jesus gives.

It is an incredible offer of mercy and grace, and it is found in Christ alone. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. From Him and through Him and to Him

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are all things. Apart from Him the wrath of God remains because of the condemnation of sin. But here is the offer of eternal life in the Son.

Is your heart gripped by the reality that you have nothing to offer Christ in and of yourself — yet God so loved the world that He gave His Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life?

PRAY