

THE GOSPEL OF

JOHN

He Must Increase

INTRODUCTION

John 3:22-36

“I am the greatest!”

If you are of a certain age, you know that as the catchphrase of Muhammad Ali. Today, we argue about who the GOAT (that would be Greatest of All Time for those of you who got the earlier reference) is in basketball or gymnastics, who is the best quarterback or, well pick a field really. Our culture, both in the Church and outside it, puts significant value on greatness. We chase it, follow it, want to be near it and often make idols of people we think of as “great” however we define it. We want greatness.

John 3 is famous for Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus and of course John 3:16, but most of us don’t remember much about the event in the second half of the chapter other than the famous phrase from John the Baptist, “he must increase, but I must decrease” (v.30). We may respond, “well of course he must”, but remember, Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest—not Abraham, not Moses, not David or Elijah or Isaiah or ANYONE else— “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11a).

And yet, in that same verse, Jesus says. “Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11b). How can this be? How can John be the greatest and the least? Because John represents an end point and a beginning:

John’s presentation of Jesus in chapter 3 announces the end of the Old Testament era. After Jesus revealed the dawn of the messianic age by changing water into wine (2:1-12) and announcing his own body to be the true temple and place of worship (2:13-25), John presents the ending of the Old Testament era in chapter 3. The sunrise of the New means the sunset of the Old. In the first half of chapter 3 Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee and teacher of Israel, reveals that even the most devout and respected Pharisees did not understand the kingdom of God and Israel’s need for rebirth, even to the extent it had already been revealed in the Old Testament (3:10).

In the second half of chapter 3, John reveals the last of Israel’s long prophetic tradition, when the Word of the Lord came finally and fully to John the Baptist to be revealed to Israel as their Messiah and Savior. In first-century Judea, the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees and the word of the prophets were pillars of Jewish religion. John shows the cataclysmic change brought by Jesus’ appearance, not merely tweaking the theology and practices of Judaism, but fulfilling them such that the old ways could no longer stand. Jesus stood in continuity with what God had revealed in the Old Testament but was not just another prophet or rabbi expounding the Scriptures of Israel. He embodied God’s Word within himself.¹

How does a great person respond when someone greater still comes along? How do they deal with controversy and followers who want to protect them? These are the very real issues that John the Evangelist shows us that John the Baptist had to face. And he did it well because he knew that Jesus must increase.

¹ Karen H. Jobes. *John Through Old Testament Eyes*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 91-92.

OPEN IT

1. What makes a man or woman great? Why do you think that?

READ IT

John 3:22-36

EXPLORE IT

2. What was the source of the controversy in verses 22-25?
3. What did John's disciples confront him about? (v.26)
4. How does John respond?
5. How is Jesus different from John (and us)?
6. What does accepting the testimony Jesus brings do? (vv.33-35)

APPLY IT

Have you ever been involved in a fight with someone close to you (spouse, parent, child) and thought you knew what it was about only to have it radically change into a fight about something entirely different? That certainly seems to be the case here. Jesus and his disciples are baptizing people in the Judean countryside near some springs. Because there is a lot of water in an otherwise dry place, it is not surprising to find John the Baptist close by. The closeness of the two groups presents the occasion for debate, which on the surface at least doesn't seem to be about Jesus or John, but about ceremonial washing itself (v.25). Different Jewish groups performed many ceremonial washings. But when John's disciples go to him, the dispute itself is left behind and the growing popularity of Jesus becomes the issue! Ceremonial purification was a real, and important social and theological issue of the day, but it was masking a larger issue for John's disciples, namely the importance of Jesus and his message.

Gary Burge offers further insight into this episode, stating that this passage

is our only record that Jesus had a baptizing ministry. But we must remain clear that at this point Jesus is conducting a baptism of repentance, no doubt like that of John . . . John [the writer, not the Baptist] goes on to make clear that Jesus' disciples, not Jesus himself, baptized people (4:2).

And later says it

gives us some information we do not find elsewhere in the New Testament. We learn, for instance, that John the Baptist has a committed circle of disciples and that some of them struggled with the decision to shift their commitments from John to Jesus. We also learn that Jesus and John enjoyed a simultaneous period of ministry in Judea.

The Synoptic [Matthew, Mark, Luke] picture of Jesus has him beginning a Galilean ministry following his baptism and temptation; it provides no information about this early period. But in Mark 6:14-29 we are left wondering why Herod Antipas (who murdered John the Baptist) would conclude that John and Jesus were linked in the popular imagination unless they had been together at some previous time. Seeing Jesus, some cried "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead" (Mark 6:14). Herod even believed it (6:16). This connection is explained by John 3:22-36. Jesus and John knew each other well. They worked together. Their disciples knew each other.²

It would seem then, that John's statement in v. 24 that this happened before John the Baptist was put in prison is doing more than stating the obvious. John apparently knows the other Gospel accounts and that this episode was not covered. He is letting his audience know that he is aware of this fact.

- 7. How do you see important social and theological issues of our day producing controversies that mask the need for Jesus? Why do you think this happens?**

² Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 120, 126-127.

8. Why does it seem that people or groups that are otherwise closely aligned can so easily get caught up in arguments and territorialism?
9. How does John's inclusion of this episode when the other Gospels don't, reinforce the need to look at all of Scripture?

John doesn't take the bait when his disciples come to him, showing that they need an attitude adjustment. Burge explores the nature of Jesus and John's relationship, highlighting the different responses of John's disciples and John himself:

The verse [26] indicates that the Baptist had followers who knew about the events surrounding Jesus' baptism, who knew John's testimony concerning him, and likely knew Jesus by name. But curiously, they do not refer to Jesus personally ("that man who was with you") and they harbor considerable envy for Jesus' fame ("everyone is going to him."). They seem disgruntled, unhappy that Jesus is becoming a celebrated leader.

The Baptist's rejoinder (3:27-30) correct the rivalry. God has provided the success and increases enjoyed by Jesus. It is not that John is now receiving a lesser role (though this is true), but that Jesus is "receiving" more followers (cf. 3:26), and has "received" these from heaven. Such growth should not be criticized. Above all, John affirms (as he did in ch. 1) that he is not the Christ (3:28) but his forerunner.³

10. Why do you think John's disciples are so jealous of Jesus? How does the jealous response of those disciples show that they really haven't absorbed or understood John's teaching?

³ Burge, 121-122.

11. How does John’s response in verses 27-28 show that he is not projecting a false humility? How can his understanding help you to understand your unique role in God’s Kingdom properly?

John the Baptist uses the metaphor of a bridegroom and his bride to explain why Jesus was gaining disciples while John apparently was not. This metaphor implies the role of Jesus as bridegroom to his disciples (see Mt 9:15; 25:1-13; Mk. 2:19), a spiritual role that was later embraced by the church, which perceived itself as the bride of Christ (2 Co 11:2; Eph 5:21-31; Rev 19:7; 21:2,9; 22:17). Given that John the Evangelist knows Jesus to be the Son of God incarnate, this metaphor is an extension of the Old Testament metaphor of God as the husband of Israel (Isa 54:5; 61:10; Jer 2:2; Hos 2:16-20).

John the Baptist identifies himself as the “friend who attends the bridegroom” or what today we would call the best man at a wedding. But in first century Judean culture, the “best man” had a much greater role that began even before the couple’s official engagement by conducting negotiations between the two families over the bride price. After a successful negotiation, the “friend of the bridegroom” escorted the bride to the groom’s home, and organized and presided over the logistics of the wedding celebration (see Jn 2:8-9). So involved was the “friend of the bridegroom” that by law he could not enter into marriage with the bride should the wedding under his oversight fail or not take place, to avoid suspicion of sabotaging the couple’s relationship. His greatest joy was to see the bride and bridegroom be united with great rejoicing.

. . . As Herman Ridderbos notes, “it is not merely with resignation therefore that John witnesses Jesus’ success among the people; it is rather a sense of full and unmixed joy that fills him when he sees that his work of preparation has reached its intended goal. All that is now left for him to do is to withdraw like the friend of the bridegroom.” And this the Baptist does with his final statement: “He must become greater; I must become less” (Jn 3:30).⁴

12. John positions himself as “best man” in a wedding. What do you think about the role you have in relation to Jesus and his church? Do you view this as a privilege or drudgery? Why is that?

⁴ Jobes, 89-90.

- 13. John directly connects his role to personal joy, the joy of completing a task well. That joy allows him to step back so that Jesus can shine. Can you relate to this or do you find it hard to have joy when others take the spotlight? Why do you think that is? (It may be helpful to think of a time when you felt joy at the completion of a difficult yet rewarding project—describe that occasion).**

Verses 31-36 offer John the Evangelist's commentary on this episode in the life of John the Baptist (just like he does after Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in 3:16-21). Here he explains the reason that John has the attitude toward Jesus that he does. Jobes explains:

Echoing John 1:14, John reminds his readers that Jesus is the one who came down from above, from heaven where he was with God (1:1). This contrasts with the prophetic calling of John the Baptist and all other prophets before him, who were merely humans speaking a message God had given them. Jesus is therefore "above all" others and all earthly circumstances. Jesus too, like the Baptist, is a witness and testifies to the knowledge of heaven that can be revealed only by one who has come from there (cf. 1:18). Tragically, "no one accepts his testimony" (3:32), repeating Jesus' pessimistic view in 3:11. Jesus was not surprised at the rejection of his message by those to whom he was sent.

. . . [Jesus is] sent by God and speaking the words of God. What God says Jesus says. What Jesus says God says. Within ancient Jewish tradition it was understood that God gave the Spirit to the prophets of the Old Testament in accordance with their mission and task (e.g., Nu 11:25-29; Jdg 3:10; 1 Ch 12:18). But Jesus, the Son of God, has been given the Spirit "without limit." Here again the evangelist presents a reason Jesus is superior to any of the Old Testament prophets, even the final of them, John the Baptist.⁵

- 14. How do verses 31-36 show that Jesus is more than just another rabbi or prophet like John the Baptist? What sets him apart? How can this understanding help you to speak to others about who Jesus is and why you believe in him?**

⁵ Jobes, 90-91.

15. John presents a conundrum for us in verses 32-33: Jesus testifies to what he has seen and heard (in heaven or from God) but people don't want to believe him. When we accept what Jesus says, we proclaim, or certify that God is truthful—but if they didn't believe him why does our “certification” matter? How does this remind us that we will face opposition, but also remind us that we need to remember it is not about us?

The promise of the new age is that we shall enter into it. John 3:36 “He who believes in the Son has eternal life.” That is present tense. We *have* eternal life. We enter into it *now*. Literally, “eternal life” is to be translated “the age of the life to come.” It is a *new age*, an altogether *eternal* age into which we enter *now* by virtue of the authority of the Son cleansing our hearts.

But with the promise comes a warning. The second part of verse 36 says, “He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” That is strong language. To disregard the word of the Son about His purification from sin is to reject the Son Himself. It is to miss the age of the life to come. One who disregards the voice of Jesus on purification will not see life, just as Nicodemus could not see the kingdom of God until he repented and believed. *Failure to trust in the Son is disobedience as much as it is disbelief.* Such a person will see wrath, and wrath is not a popular subject.

J. I. Packer has given us a beautiful definition of wrath in his book *Knowing God*: “God’s wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil.” Packer then asks a question: “Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect?” The answer must be no. [emphasis in the original]⁶

16. John says that whoever believes in Jesus *has* life, not *will have* life. What does that mean and why does it seem that so many Christians live as if they really don't have life?

⁶ Joseph Ryan, *That You May Believe: New Life in the Son*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 115.

17. Most of us don't like the idea of a wrathful God, whether we are Christians or not. How does this passage show us both the reality of God's wrath and its true nature?

Chuck Swindoll offers the following insight as we seek to apply this passage to our own lives:

[G]enuine humility calls attention to Christ, not to self (30:30-34). There's a sad misconception among some Christians that genuine humility stems from feelings of worthlessness. They mistakenly think that "decreasing" self will "increase" Christ. Frankly, that sounds more like depression than joy. Truth be told, the focus of attention is still self.

John regarded the exaltation of Christ as the source of his joy. . . . Don't waste time trying to decrease yourself by looking super humble. That's focusing on the wrong object. You'll dig yourself into a hole trying to act humble, appear humble, and sound humble. Before long, you'll be the proudest one in the church. Instead, stand aside. Forget yourself as you exalt Christ. Turn glory toward Him. And without ever knowing it, humility will have emerged naturally.⁷

18. How can your view of Jesus and his greatness shape your attitude to your role and the role of others this week? Think about how you can show the humility of John to the people and places you have influence.

⁷ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary vol. 4: John* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2014), 83. This study was compiled and questions were written by Kevin O'Brien—www.villagebible.church/smallgroup