

John 22 – He Must Increase

07/28/2024

Scripture 1: (Jn. 3:22-36 ESV)

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.

John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison).

Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 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."

John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 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. He must increase, but I must decrease."

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. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 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.

Sermon:

Following Nicodemus' night time visit to Jesus, John's Gospel gives us some other unique information about Jesus' ministry.

While the Synoptic Gospels jump straight from Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2) into His Galilean ministry following the arrest of John the Baptist (Matt 4:12; Mark 1:14), John the Evangelist reminds us that there was also a period of ministry overlap between the Baptist and Jesus. There was not an immediate, easy, "one or the other" transition. Instead, the Evangelist suggests that in some ways the early part of Jesus's ministry was similar to the Baptist's, yet that Christ's came to be recognized as being the greater when some people began to view them as leading separate, rival, and competing ministries.

Unfortunately, the parenthetical note, "... *for John had not yet been put in prison...*", raises questions about the chronology of Jesus' ministry that we cannot answer. Some have suggested that perhaps this latter portion of chapter 3 should be located at the end of chapter 1 due to its related content, but there is no manuscript evidence to support that suggestion. Another suggestion is that the Baptist was "imprisoned" more than once, but that is only supposition. Considering this unknowability, we must remember that the Gospel writers set out to tell a narrative (and persuasive) history of Jesus' life and work and not to present an accurate timeline, because that was not how "Histories" in the ancient world were written {see Herodotus and Tacitus}; detailed accuracy was not obligatory. The most important point we should reasonably take from this remark is that everything prior to this point in John's Gospel occurred sometime early on in Jesus' ministry. This parenthetical is just a time marker.

The Gospel writers were not preoccupied with recording the Baptist's story because their subject was Jesus. The Baptist, as important as he was in preparing God's people for Christ's appearing, was not their focus; so, he is only mentioned for how he supports Jesus. Beyond the few details about him in the Gospels, there is no accurate chronology of the Baptist's prophetic ministry recorded {beyond the timing of his death, which is figured in relation to a failed conflict with the Arabia king Aretas, Herod Antipas' former father-in-law, whose daughter he divorced in order to marry his brother, Philip's widow, Herodius (who was also his niece, the daughter of Aristobulus, another son of Herod "the Great"), and whose marriage John the Baptist publicly condemned (Matt 14:3-4)}.

This passage reminds us that Jesus and John did not have just one single moment of intersection at His baptism; it was not an isolated incident. There was more continuity and a greater depth of relationship between Jesus and John than many Christians often realize: they were relatives and they were also colleagues. This builds stronger evidence for practical continuity between Jews and Christians, between ancient Israel and the Church; for our unity as the one whole People of God, under one covenant of Grace. Christians possess and accept the revelation of God's Son, Jesus, as the Messiah, while Jews reject Him, leading them to diverge from God's truth in faith (Romans 9:6), this strengthens the case that the Church is the continuation of Israel rather than a replacement of it.

The relationship between the Baptist and Jesus displays how the Old Testament is not separate or distinct from the New; the New builds upon the Old. The Old revealed "types" and a "...*shadow of the good things to come*..." (Heb. 10:1 ESV) while the New presents "...*the true form of these realities*..." (Heb. 10:1 ESV). This ultimately means that we cannot have the New Testament without the Old; that the Gospel cannot be received as "good news" without knowledge of the Law and our sinfulness (Romans 7:7-8:17).

We are told that Jesus had an otherwise undescribed period ministering in Judea, distinctly and separately from His ministry in Galilee. But, this does not mean that His teaching was any different, only that His expected audience was. During the 1st Century, most of those living in closer proximity to Jerusalem were likely:

- more religious;
- more wealthy; and
- more politically engaged; or,
- were in the service of and socially supportive of the three categories above.

Most Judeans who heard Jesus during this time would have been members of various different elite circles. They would not have been "common folk", such as the poor and down-trodden, because the lower classes could less afford the opportunity to go to Jesus. The "elites" would have been disinclined to hear and receive His Gospel message because they probably lacked a "felt need" for it.

- Does that not also sound like many people in America today? Many people are content and satisfied with the little that they have, as much as it is. They are blind and ignorant to their spiritual and moral poverty, because they are drowning in material wealth. They were and we are in need of Jesus, but humanity is so easily enslaved to own sin that we fail to recognize our chains (or care when we do), until or unless the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and our heart.

It is unsurprising that the writers of the Synoptics ignored this period of Jesus' life, since there was so little immediate apparent evidence of fruit in response. However, the book of Acts would seem to imply that Jesus'

Judean ministry did have a great impact, even if it took longer for the seeds of *pisteuo* to germinate and bloom (Acts 2:41-47, 3:1-26, 4:15-23, 5:13, 6:1).

Now apparently, during this season of ministry “*Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.*” Jesus and His disciples were baptizing people, but we cannot presume that their baptizing was the same as what Jesus will later command in Matthew 28, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” (Matt. 28:19-20 ESV). Instead, based upon the discussion which follows, their baptizing was more similar to John's: a baptism of repentance; not a covenant sign and seal. If it had been something even more different or innovative than that of the Baptist, then it surely would have been recorded (if only because of the controversy it generated).

John the Evangelist also gives us additional details which explain a more location-based context. Recall that at the close of chapter 2, Jesus was in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover when He performed a prophetic sign by driving the money-changers out of the Temple courts. Since we are now being told that “*After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside...*”, the region surrounding Jerusalem, it suggests that Nicodemus' visit to Jesus was during that Passover festival in Jerusalem. This implies that Nicodemus was more limited in his knowledge about Jesus' works and miracles than we often assume; Jesus would not yet have been widely known as a wonder working Rabbi from Galilee.

Nicodemus would likely have only known about the incident at the Temple for certain but he may have heard rumors about the wine incident in Cana. Lastly, he may have (probably) also seen or heard the other “*...signs that he was doing.*” (Jn. 2:23 ESV) in Jerusalem during the feast. These are what would have prompted him to go to Jesus saying, “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.*” (Jn. 3:2 ESV) {It is not at all likely that Nicodemus would have been sent to “investigate Jesus” by either the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees, or the Romans as “The Chosen” presents. While “The Chosen” claims to be “inspired” by Scripture, beyond the use of certain names and story ideas, it remains wholly a work of fiction. The Jesus of “The Chosen” is not the Jesus of the Bible.} Nicodemus was almost certainly an eye witness to Jesus' signs prior to visiting, explaining why He was being drawn to Jesus, because the fires of regenerating faith were beginning to burn within his heart.

Did you ever consider why Nicodemus is not more present throughout the Gospels? Wondering why he only appears three times: visiting Jesus at night in chapter 3; during the Feast of Booths in chapter 7; and lastly, helping Joseph of Arimathea with Jesus' burial during Passover in chapter 19 (John 19:38-42)? Remember, Pharisees had no official role or place within 1st Century Jewish religion. They were just really, really, really “religious” people; very devout and strictly obedient to Torah. Being a Pharisee was not their “job”, Paul was a tent-maker by trade (Acts 18:3). Religion was important to them and it may have been their “Main Thing”, but they all still had an ordinary vocation and ordinary responsibilities. Nicodemus was not called by Jesus to follow Him in all of His comings and goings, yet it seems Nicodemus may have begun to follow Jesus in his own daily life. Thus Nicodemus only appears in Jerusalem when Jesus is in Jerusalem because all Jewish men (especially all those who took their faith seriously) were required to be in Jerusalem at those times, during the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Nicodemus was a responsible person and John offers the sense that he may well have been the first person to live the “ordinary” Christian life, post regeneration/conversion; making him a template and model for us to emulate both in obedience to God and faith for salvation.

Also, the present location of the Baptist's ministry, “*...baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there...*” is suggestive but definitive. Aenon is a transliteration of a term meaning “fountain” and Salim is a transliteration/derivative of “peace”. Two towns bearing similar names in the region around Jerusalem have

been identified in present day Israel, with one having seven natural springs to provide an excess of water, so they are plausible locations. Some who prefer a figurative interpretation of Scripture suggest a spiritualized connection between “fountains” near to “peace”, particularly in light of Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, but most likely this reference originally served as a verifiable evidentiary fact to correlate the Evangelist's words.

So, soon after Nicodemus' nighttime visit in Jerusalem during the Passover, Jesus and His disciples went out into the Judean wilderness and began preaching, teaching, and baptizing in a manner similar to the Baptist but, they were not with the Baptist.

“*Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.*”. Ritual purification was the purpose of their ceremonial washing to achieve a state of “cleanness” by the removal of spiritual impurity gained through contact with many ordinary things in life, impurities which impeded a person's access to the divine. These washings are why so many *mikvoht* were located near to the Temple Mount; for Jews to pass through on their way up to worship the only Holy, Sovereign, Lord GOD.

This purification was not an issue of sin or sinfulness. Jews did not believe that those washings would remove their sin or its guilt, sacrifices were still required for that, but they had become a {an interpreted} part of Torah obedience (Ex 30:18-21; Lev 11:24-28, 13:1-8; Num 8:6-8; 2 Kings 5:10) developing during the Hasmonean {Maccabean} inter-Testamental period.

We understand John's “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin*” (Mark 1:4), as an outgrowth or evolution from these ritual washings, as opposed to being something entirely new in Jewish religion; just like Christian baptism is an outgrowth from John's baptism where it becomes a symbol and seal {and hope in the case of believer's children} of the Holy Spirit's regeneration, His washing of us with the blood of Christ (Ps 51:2-7) to truly cleanse us of our sin, by our faith in Him and as a visible sign of our admission into the covenant of Grace and our adoption as a child of God.

This debate and discussion about purification apparently dealt with what John's baptism actually did and meant; therefore, they went to their teacher to settle the question for them. “*Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness-- look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.*” Although that is not a question we would expect in a concern about purity, it is reasonable since it implies that they believed the effectiveness of their purification was connected to the person doing the washing; something that we (Protestants; Presbyterians) deny as regarding the sacraments: their effectiveness does not depend on who administers them, but on the Holy Spirit who works faith within those who receive them (WSF #91).

So, it really seems like what they were debating was: who gave the better bath? The true “question behind the question” was, whose baptism was better, John's or Jesus's? Whose was more effective? Which one got a person to be more “pure”?

- Their dispute has an element of self interest within it. Were they missing out on something more and better by not being baptized by Jesus or were they the better ones, since they remained with the original?
- Certainly John's disciples were also being jealous for his sake: his honor, glory, and popularity; against this new coming upstart, Jesus, just as Jesus' disciples would become jealous for his sake, such as when “*...the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them.*” (Lk. 9:53-55 ESV)

Nevertheless, the Evangelist will answer this for us later, clarifying things in 4:2, saying that “...*Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples...*” (Jn. 4:2 ESV). Baptism by Jesus' disciples at this time, was no better and likely no different than that of John the Baptist.

Yet, in answering his disciple, the Baptist was showing extraordinarily self-awareness. He knew and understood precisely Who he was and What he had been sent by God to do. He answered them explaining what he understood and taught them the attitude which they (and which we) should have whenever we meditate upon our relationship to Christ. “*A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 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. He must increase, but I must decrease.*”.

Let us break down his answer.

- “*A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.*” First, the Baptist reminded them that **everything**, all that we have, depends upon God's providence; that there is **nothing** we have that we did not first receive (1 Cor 4:7) therefore, we have no reason to boast or to be jealous of others.
- “*You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'*” Second, the Baptist reminds them of his own confession: that he is not the Christ. John knew what his limitations were. He knew what his role was. He understood and accepted the simple fact that no matter how great he might be, he would always be “Number Two”...when compared to Jesus Christ. Neither he nor we, will ever be “Number One”. Most of us will never even break into the “Top Ten”. But, once we realize and if we accept those facts, then it is easier to be satisfied and content with what we have since our expectations in life become far more reasonable.
- “*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.*” Third, the Baptist uses the analogy of a wedding to describe his role: he was like the “best man” at a wedding. The “*friend of the bridegroom*”'s job, within their context, was to help the groom with all the wedding preparations. He stood in support of the groom, as a witness in defense of his marriage and its consummation. The final and most important duty of this “friend” was to guard, guide, and lead the bride to her bridal chamber where the groom patiently waited.
 - Furthermore, the metaphor of marriage is used throughout Scripture to describe the relationship between God and His Chosen people. This metaphor reminds us that just as marriage is a binding covenant between a man and a woman (Malachi 2:14), the LORD has bound Himself to His Chosen people in covenant.
 - While it may also be understood and interpreted literally, Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) has been traditionally understood as a metaphor or allegory describing the covenant marriage relationship between Israel and the LORD, or the Church and Christ, by both Jews and Christians.
 - Isaiah expressly names the LORD as “Husband” to God's people, “*For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the LORD has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.*” (Isa. 54:5-6 ESV)

- The prophet Hosea is commanded to engage in several prophetic “sign acts”, with the foundational one being God's command to, *"Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD."* (Hos. 1:2 ESV); leading Hosea to publicly play the role of God and his wife Gomer the role of adulterous Israel.
- Ultimately, we have the *“marriage supper of the Lamb”* image in Revelation 19 (v. 9), symbolizing the union between the Church and Christ; of God the Father giving us to His Son, as His beloved and betrothed.
- So, by understanding and accepting that he is not the bridegroom, but is both the “friend” and “the bride”, the Baptist was able to rejoice knowing that the LORD's anticipated purposes of redemption were being brought to fruition and that the “Jubilee of God” {*“...the year of the LORD's favor...”* (Isa. 61:2 ESV); 61:1-11} was now beginning. The Baptist understood that he had more to celebrate and be glad of because he was a “Number Two” to Christ, than if he was “Number One” over the whole world, because the good King has come. His joy was complete because he knew the source of Joy and because he believed {had *pisteuo* faith} in God's covenant promises made for His people and he knew it was neither his job nor place to achieve them.
- *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”* Fourth and finally, the Baptist understood that glory and honor are finite things. He understood that if God's purposes are being achieved, then the focus must naturally be turned away from him; it must turn towards Christ instead. John the Baptist was important, he was necessary, but the continuing need for him and his ministry, for his importance, began to immediately decrease after Jesus was revealed as the Christ. The Baptist's job was to anoint and proclaim the Christ at His appearing; once that was done, so was he. Now, the Baptist was a distraction whom Satan could try to either turn into a rival or would destroy. So instead, in humility and his self-awareness, the Baptist was glad to “bow out” and remain satisfied with His ordained part in God's plan.

This final part is a lesson which most Christians and all human persons have difficulty learning, accepting, and abiding by. *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”*. We all want to be “Number One” by our nature and that is a good desire for us. It is a drive which God gave us by making us in His Image. We were given the command to *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”* (Gen. 1:28 ESV), but sin twists our correct desire for dominion, turning it into domination. Then we forget that, as we subdue the earth, we are ourselves intended to be subdued and subordinate to the LORD God who made and commands us. It is through the increase of our glory, that we increase His glory. We do all things for the glory of God and the glory we acquire, we redirect to Him because it belongs to Him truly.

- Therefore, we all must decrease for His increase. We shall all cast our crowns at His feet (Rev 4:10), surrendering our glory to Him: Christians in love and devotion, but all others with hatred, fear and trembling, wailing and gnashing of teeth.
- When we remember that the glory is not ours; when we remember that it is not about us; when we remember that we are not the most important person in the world, then it becomes easier to rejoice and be satisfied, and to better appreciate everything we possess as the “gift from God” that it is.

Yet I cannot imagine that either this disciple of the Baptist or the Jew who were discussing “purification” were very pleased, happy, or satisfied with his response because it did not really answer their question, or did it?

- He affirmed that Jesus is the Christ, while he was not;
- He affirmed Jesus as God's Groom for His Chosen Bride; and,
- He affirmed that Jesus must increase, while he must decrease.

But this was actually the answer they needed to hear. Those who came to John for baptism were looking for a form or a degree of purification. They were concerned with improving their personal holiness and their standing or status before the LORD. They wanted to be “clean”. But John never actually offered that to them. He offered them a “baptism of repentance”; an opportunity to make a public profession and show sign that they were sorry for the wrongs that they had done and that they were intentional about not repeating or continuing in them. John did not do anything to them. John merely offered them the opportunity to humble themselves and offer the LORD their contrite spirit and broken heart (Ps 51:17; Is 66:2) as a “*sacrifice of thanksgiving*” (Ps 50:14, 116:17) for His mercy and grace. John could not purify the people, only God could; only Jesus Christ could and would.

- If they wanted to become pure, then they had to repent {Hebrew: t'shuva; repent or “turn around”}. John's baptism did not purify them, instead it pointed them to the one who would: Jesus Christ.
- If they wanted to be purified, if they wanted to be made holy, if they wanted to be justified before God, then they needed to go to Jesus. They needed to follow the message and leave the messenger.

The message of salvation in Christ Jesus was what mattered, not the man who proclaimed it. Jesus was the object of their faith. Jesus was the Master whom they needed to obey in fidelity and love.

Therefore, Jesus would increase at the expense of John and at our expense, as we humble ourselves before Him. Yet, although we are decreased in some sense, we do not become less; we become more, instead. By submitting to Him, by humbling ourselves before Him, by trusting Him in faith we are united into Him and share in all His good benefits.

- Through our union into Christ, our glory that we gave to Him, is shared back with us as even greater glory, as His beloved brothers and sisters; as His Bride!
- His Spirit sanctifies us and cleanses us of our sin by removing all the impurity and stains of sin, by restoring us to wholeness in truth, and by making us who and what we were created to be.
 - We are each like a rusted, broken down, decrepit car that has been exposed to corrosive elements for years and the Holy Spirit is like a mechanic and a body man. He grinds off the rust. He patches and fills our holes. He cleans and repairs our filthy and clogged motor. He replaces the broken glass and the torn upholstery. Then finally, He gives us a fresh coat of paint, new tires, and a full tank of gas. That is restoration and sanctification.
 - Through the process of sanctification, we lose so much, yet we gain far more and it begins with our humility; when we humble ourselves and gladly accept that we are not “Number One”. “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*”.

So really, it was a question about purity and purification. We must decrease in our sinfulness, by growing in holiness, and therefore, increase Christ's glory!

We must gladly acknowledge Jesus Christ as **both** our Savior and Lord. Then we may joyfully submit ourselves to His rule over our lives. We must subdue our hearts to His sovereign reign for our own good benefit and His

glory (WSC #26). We must accept His protection and His restraint of our worst inclinations as given through His Word and by His Spirit. We must live for His glory rather than our own because, it is only by His increase and through our decrease that we shall receive all that our Father in heaven has promised and desires to give us.

This is what both John's and Jesus' disciples baptizing means for us; as a “*baptism of repentance*”:

- we both confess our sins and express our desire to stop sinning;
- we turn to the LORD in faith and hope for His forgiveness; then,
- we must begin to live more pure and holy lives, for His glory, as a response to His mercy.

Therefore, as Christians, we are called to live lives of holiness in our whole lives:

- by fleeing from all our past sinful practices in earnest repentance;
- by mortifying all of our sinful desires and inclinations;
- by submitting to Jesus Christ in all aspects of our lives, especially His Moral Law as the rule by which we live;
- by becoming better disciples of Christ, living pure and chaste lives in all of our words, thoughts, deeds, and desires;
- by doing good works of charity on account of our faith;
- by loving others sacrificially, especially those who seem unlovable, like our enemies;
- by serving others and humbling ourselves before men;
- by seeking the benefit and good of others before our own;
- by sharing the good news of Christ that we have received and believe with others;
- by teaching others to follow Christ and making them disciples;
- through the increase of prayer: praise, confession, and thanksgiving;
- through the study of Scripture because:
 - the better you know it, the better you may follow and apply it in your life;
 - the better you know it, the better you will come to recognize your own sin and your need for Jesus;

We Christians do all of this, not as a means of “earning” God's love or favor, but because we know what He has already done for us in giving us His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to believe upon, so that all who believe on Him will not perish but will enjoy eternal life with Him all **because**, God so loved the world and so loves His adopted children.

AMEN