

THE LATER MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

John 3:22-36

He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6).

For many months, the Jordan River had been the scene of a growing ministry. To this place had come a man from the wilderness, proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. He had preached repentance and had baptized those who showed the fruits of that repentance.

This was John the Baptist and many had come out to hear him. Of those who came and heard, some went away rejecting the truth, while others went away having believed John's words. There were still others who believed, but who did not go away. These were the ones who remained with John and became his disciples.

Then one day, Jesus had come to the Jordan and had been baptized by John. Later, John had testified that this was the One whose coming had been promised. Two of John's disciples had left John to follow Jesus, but others had remained with John.

After an extended period of ministry, Jesus has returned to the area of the Jordan and many of those who had been identified with John's ministry are now going over to Him after hearing of the fantastic miracles which had been performed in Jerusalem. As our scene opens, there will be a new problem arising. It will be a problem of professional jealousy on the part of John's disciples.

When I was at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, I had the opportunity to co-teach an adult Bible class with my old and dear friend from Bible College, Norm Wise. Norm was a special assistant to Dr. James Kennedy and he has a tremendous gift for teaching. His Bible class rapidly became the most popular, and hence, the fastest growing class within the church. It wasn't long before this began to cause problems. Another teacher within the church came to Norm and asked if he would send some of the people from his class back to the one that they had deserted. He apparently felt that Norm was somehow stealing people for his growing Bible class. This spirit of competition between Christian ministers is not a new one. It is seen at the very beginning of the church.

THE PARALLEL MINISTRIES OF JESUS AND JOHN

22 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. 23 And John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and they were coming and were being baptized. 24 For John had not yet been thrown into prison. (John 3:22-24).

Prior to this time, Jesus and His disciples have been at Jerusalem, attending the Feast of Passover. It was here that Jesus had cleansed the temple. And it was probably here that He talked to Nicodemus.

Now, Jesus and His disciples leave Jerusalem and travel down to the Jordan River near to the place which it passes the ancient city of Jericho.

1. Jesus and Discipleship: *And there He was spending time with them and baptizing (3:22).*

There were two parts to the ministry of Jesus. They are both given within this verse.

- Spending time with the disciples.

This was the inward ministry. It was the ministry of the few. It was the quality time that Jesus spent in developing the character of the men who had chosen to follow Him.

In this age of the mega-ministry, I fear that we have lost sight of discipleship and what it really means. We are impressed by great numbers. We like to see the multitudes. Multitudes are not bad, but we should never lose sight of the one-on-one ministry of discipleship.

Notice how this is accomplished. It isn't by preaching sermons from a pulpit. It isn't by teaching in a Sunday School class. It is accomplished by spending time with people.

- Baptizing.

This is a reference to the outward ministry. It is the ministry of the many. It is the evangelistic ministry. It is a ministry with which we have been commissioned. We have been sent forth to proclaim to the world the message that Jesus had died for sins and that He lives today and that He calls men to repentance.

You might be thinking, “But John, I can’t go to the world.” That may be true. But you can go next door. You can go to the fellow who works with you. You can go to that person who lives where you live. You can introduce him to Jesus.

Notice that the initial ministry of Jesus was very much like that of John the Baptist. John spent time with his disciples and Jesus spent time with his disciples. John proclaimed the message of the coming kingdom and Jesus proclaimed the message of the coming kingdom. John baptized people with water and Jesus baptized people with water.

It was only a matter of time before the effects of two identical ministries would be felt. It was only a matter of time before people would begin to compare the two ministries.

2. John’s Ministry of Baptizing: *And John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim (3:23).*

While Jesus was ministering in Judea, John had moved the arena of his ministry northward almost to Galilee.

Aenon is an Aramaic name. It is the Aramaic word for “fountains.” There was a group of seven springs here which flowed down into the Jordan River.

The reason that John was able to minister here was because *John had not yet been thrown into prison (3:24)*. Each of the Synoptic accounts record John’s imprisonment at the next event which occurred after the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 4:12; Mark 1:14; Luke 3:20). The Gospel of John is the only account which records this early Judean ministry of Jesus and the parallel baptizing ministry of Jesus and John.

You see, the Synoptic writers view this portion as merely the foundational ministry of Jesus. They picture the actual ministry of Christ as beginning after this early Judean period with His return to Galilee.

THE POINT OF CONFLICT

25 There arose therefore a discussion on the part of John s disciples with a Jew about purification. 26 And they came to John and said, “Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have borne witness, behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him.” (John 3:25-26).

It wasn't long before the parallel ministries of Jesus and John brought about the beginnings of a conflict. It began quite innocently enough during a discussion among John's disciples.

Two of John's disciples had already left him to follow after Jesus (John 1:35-37). However, there were others who continued to be loyal to John, even though it was John who was testifying of Jesus.

Some of these disciples were so devoted to John that they would continue as a select body, even after John had died. More than twenty years later, there would still be those who thought of themselves as disciples of John (Acts 19:1-7)

1. Occasion for the Conflict: *There arose therefore a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification (3:25).*

One day, the disciples of John were engaged in a discussion group when the subject of purification came up. This is what the ministries of Jesus and John were all about. They did not emphasize the ceremonial purification rites as did the Pharisees. They were concerned with a spiritual purification of the individual.

Notice that this discussion took place between John's disciples and a Jew. We are not told if he was a religious leader. We are not even told if he was a Pharisee or a Sadducee. We only know that he was a Jew.

If we may be permitted some sanctified speculation, we can imagine how this conversation might have gone:

“It's all very well for you disciples to talk about the teachings of your master, but you are not the only ones who teach about purification. What about the Essenes? They live out in the desert and wash themselves several times a day in order to keep themselves ceremonially pure. And, if you want to look at ceremonial purity, look at the Pharisees. They show a fanatic rigidity in their interpretations of the Law regarding purity.”

“But it is not mere ceremonial purity that we look for,” the disciples of John are quick to reply, “but an inner cleansing of the heart.”

The man replies, “Well, if it is moral purity that you are preaching, then you have no monopoly on that, either. There is the Carpenter from Galilee who is preaching the same thing down in Judea by the Jordan. In fact, He is drawing a lot more people than you are. He must have something that you don't have.”

We are not told what answer these disciples gave to this Jew, but we are told that the discussion motivated them to come to John and point out what they considered to be a growing problem.

2. The Point of Comparison: *And they came to John and said, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have borne witness, behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him" (3:26).*

Notice that these disciples do not even mention the name of Jesus. Instead, they refer to Him as that one "to whom you have borne witness." Do you see what they are saying? Can you see the implications of it?

"This impudent newcomer who is treading on our turf."

"This young upstart who is taking away our people."

"This is the One for whom you gave His start into the ministry. He owes it all to you, John. And this is how He repays you; by undermining your ministry. He has gone down to the Jordan and now He is baptizing there and everyone is going over to Him. Aren't you going to do anything about this? Maybe you could take Him to court and sue Him for detracting from your ministry."

Clearly, these disciples have a problem. It is the problem of JEALOUSY. Why are these disciples jealous? John obviously does not share their jealousy. So, why are his disciples jealous? What makes them so different from John? I want to suggest that the difference is seen in the answer of John.

THE ANSWER OF JOHN

27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing, unless it has been 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 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. And so this joy of mine has been made full. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.'" (John 3:27-30).

John anticipates their complaint about Jesus and he answers his disciples by contrasting himself with Jesus. He does this in four points.

- All things are received from heaven (3:27).
- John is not the Christ (3:28).

- An illustration of a bridegroom (3:29).
- A summary statement (3:30).

The first of these statements contains the doctrinal principle which allows John to recognize the next three statements without any pangs of jealousy or frustration.

1. All things are received from heaven: *A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven (3:27).*

This is profound. There is a principle here which allows John to remain free from jealousy, even though Jesus is outshining him in the ministry. It is a principle that can release you from the bonds of jealousy that may have ensnared you, no matter what the cause. It is the principle of the sovereignty of God.

A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven.

What does this mean? It means that God is in control. If a ministry thrives, then it is because God has so ordained it. Likewise, if a ministry dwindles and seems to fall, it has been done according to God's plan.

Have you ever seen your goals become unattainable? Have your well-laid plans ever crumbled before you? Have you ever faced failure?

This principle can be a source of comfort to you. The application of this principle eliminates all motivation for jealousy and its counterpart -- pride. If God is in control, then why should I be jealous of the success of another? If God is in control, then how can I be prideful in the success that He has provided?

There is a great deal of security in this principle. You may not have a tremendous I.Q. You may not be popular. You may not be a great orator. But you can know that God is in control.

When we come to John 6, we will see Jesus demonstrating this same principle. Large numbers of people will gather to Him. They will look at the miracles and they will be impressed. But then, they will leave. Finally, only the Twelve will remain. But, Jesus will not get upset. He knows that the great crowds come from God. And he knows that the Twelve come from God.

John expresses that same attitude. He knows that he has a threefold ministry. He has been called by God to do three things.

- He is to Prepare the Way.

This is his ministry of a forerunner -- to go before the King and prepare the people to meet their king.

- He is to Show the Way.

This is what he did when he pointed to Jesus and said, "That is Him! That is the Messiah! That is the Lamb of God which I told you was coming!"

- He is to Get Out of the Way.

When the first two ministries are completed, then John is to move out of the way and let Jesus take over. This is what set John apart. Any other forerunner would have wanted to be a part of the way. John was content to get out of the way. Here is the principle. If you are not willing to get out of the way, then you will only be in the way.

2. John is not the Christ: *You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but 'I have been sent before Him' (3:28).*

These disciples have been with John for many months. They have heard the Pharisees ask him if he is the Messiah. They have heard him answer emphatically that he is not. Rather, he is the forerunner of the Messiah.

It is not the forerunner who is important, but the One who comes after him. It is not the messenger who is important, but the One who gave the message. It is not the Bible Teacher who is important, but the One about whom the Bible Teaches.

In the same manner, it is not the friend of the bridegroom that is important, but rather the bridegroom himself.

3. An illustration of a bridegroom: *He who has the bride is the bridegroom (3:29).*

To whom does the bridegroom refer? It is really rather obvious. It is Jesus Christ. Who is the bride? It is God's people. It is the assembly of God's people. It is both Israel and the church. There are a number of passages in the Bible that present this symbolism.

*And I will betroth you to me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in
lovingkindness and in compassion,
And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness.
Then you will know the Lord. (Hosea 2:19-20).*

“For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the Lord of hosts; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth.

6 For the Lord has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected,” says your God. (Isaiah 54:5-6).

... and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:5b).

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:2).

When you came to Jesus Christ in faith, you entered into the family of God. You became a part of a relationship that is to be so intimate that it is described in the terms of a marriage.

But the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice (3:29). In ancient times, the friend of the bridegroom was the one who had helped the groom to arrange the marriage feast. We would call him the “best man.” He would go with the groom to the house of the bride to negotiate with the bride's father the terms of the betrothal. He would arrange the details of the wedding feast and see that all was prepared.

On the day of the wedding, he would accompany the groom to the house of the bride's father. He would ceremonially introduce the bride to her groom and, until he had done so, they were not to speak to one another.

This is the picture here. John's ministry has been to prepare the way for the bridegroom and to introduce Him to the nation of Israel. Once that introduction has been made, then John's job is finished. The groom has remained silent until the introduction has been made. But once the introduction has been completed, the groom can now speak for Himself.

The friend of the groom no longer stands between the bride and the groom. His job has been to get them together and then to get out of the way. The friend of the groom doesn't go on the honeymoon.

4. A summary statement: *He must increase, but I must decrease (3:30).*

At the beginning of the wedding arrangements, the friend of the bridegroom held a very important place in the proceedings. However, once the groom and the bride

have been brought together, then the importance of the friend decreases.

The friend doesn't go on the honeymoon. He is not the center of attention at the marriage feast. He just sits there and is silent. Is he upset about this? He is not. Rather, he rejoices at the happiness of the groom.

So it is with John. He is not upset or jealous because Jesus is getting all of the attention. This very thing that upsets these disciples is John's source of delight. This is the very thing that John has been working toward. This has been John's goal from the beginning. Now, his job is done.

THE WITNESS FROM ABOVE

31 He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 What He has seen and heard, of that He bears witness; and no man received His witness.

33 He who has received His witness has set his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For He whom God has sent speaks 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 He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (John 3:31-36).

John has just said that Jesus must increase while John must decrease. Now, he gives the reason for this. It is because the One who comes from heaven is greater than the one who is of the earth. Do you see what John is doing? He is presenting a contrast between himself and Jesus.

John the Baptist	Jesus
He is not the Christ.	He is the Christ.
He is the friend of the bridegroom	He is the bridegroom
He must decrease	He must increase
He is of the earth and speaks of the earth	He is from above and is able to speak of heavenly things

John has been a voice in the wilderness, proclaiming the coming of the Lord. Jesus is now seen as the Word who was from the beginning, but who has now come to be the communication of God to man.

1. A Witness from Above: *He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all (3:31).*

The witness that Jesus gives is a better witness than that of John because it is a witness that comes from above. When I drive on the highway, I sometimes tune in my radio to a news channel so that I can listen in on the traffic report. This live report comes from a news helicopter that is flying over the traffic. Their testimony is given from the perspective of one who is “above.” At such times, I listen to their direction because they have a better perspective than I do. I am not looking at the traffic from above. I have a limited perspective. It is a perspective of someone “from the earth.” I cannot see the accident in the road or the detour that is up ahead of me. I therefore listen to the testimony of the one who can see these things.

Here is the point. Jesus has come from above. He brings the perspective of one who can see all of those things that are hidden from my limited perspective. This means that I ought to listen to His testimony and act upon it. This has application, not only to the gospel, but also to how we, as Christians, live out our lives. When He tells me that my life will go better if I am faithful to my wife, if I will be a faithful steward of my finances, if I place God first in my life and love my neighbor as myself, He is giving me these lessons from an “above” perspective. Those things may not sound so appealing to one who is “of the earth,” but that is only because of my limited perspective. If I could see the entire course of my life as He is able to see the entire course of my life, I would have a different outlook.

2. A Witness Given: *What He has seen and heard, of that He bears witness (3:32).*

Jesus is from above. Therefore, He has a higher perspective. John is not from above. John can only speak about things concerning the earth. But Jesus has seen that which no man has ever seen. Jesus can reveal heaven to man because He came from heaven.

The good news is that Jesus has not kept this perspective to Himself. He has come to reveal this “above” perspective to us so that we can orient our lives and our faith accordingly.

3. A Witness Rejected: *And no man received His witness (3:32).*

When man initially hears the message of the gospel, his reaction is to reject that message. Why is this? Why do men reject Jesus? It is because the message of the gospel is a message of man's helplessness. We teach that man is lost and that he has no way in which he can help himself. That is not a very popular message. It is not a message that glorifies men. But it is a message that glorifies God.

4. A Witness Approved: *He who has received His witness has set his seal to this, that God is true (3:33).*

The seal of the ancient world was very significant. When a ruler wished to authenticate a document, he would take a small bit of hot wax and drip it onto the parchment. Then, while it was cooling, he would press his signet ring onto the wax, leaving its engraved impression there. This seal served to authenticate that document, proving that it was original and true.

Do you see the point that John is making? When a man believes the witness of Jesus, he is setting his word to the fact that the promises of God have come true. Why you came to Christ in faith, you were signing on the dotted line that God is who He says He is and that He will do what He said He will do.

5. A Witness from God: *For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God (3:34).*

Now John clarifies what he meant by the previous illustration. Anyone who believes the words of Jesus and accepts them as truth is placing his signature to the fact that God is true. Why is this? It is because Jesus is speaking the words of God.

6. A Spiritual Witness: *For He gives the Spirit without measure (3:34).*

The word “for” is a purpose clause. It might not be immediately clear to the casual reader as to who might be the object of this pronoun. Who is it that gives the Spirit without measure? It is not Jesus; it is God. The reason why we know that Jesus speaks the words of God is because he has been given the Holy Spirit. Not only has He been given the Holy Spirit, but He has been given the Spirit without measure.

This means that we are not to accept only some of the words of Jesus as being the Word of God. He was not filled with the Spirit for only part of His ministry. He had the Spirit without measure.

7. A Witness of Love: *The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand (3:35).*

Not only has Jesus been given God’s message, and not only has Jesus been given the Spirit without measure, but He has also been given all things. Everything that Jesus gave up to come to earth and suffer and die has been given back to Him.

Do not miss this! Jesus has been given the entire universe. It is God’s gift to the Son. But that is not all. When you come to Christ in faith, you become a co-heir

with Him. When you give up who you are to become who He has called you to be, He blesses you with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3). You are an heir of the kingdom.

If you have never come to Christ, then you have a decision to make. You can turn to Him in faith. Or you can continue to reject Him.

8. A Witness for a Decision: *He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (3:36).*

Notice the use of the present tense. We are not speaking of something that was a long time ago in a place far away. Neither are we looking at something which is in the far future. We are speaking of a present reality.

If you are believing in the Son, then you have eternal life. It is your present possession. You have it right now. But there is also another present tense in this verse. It describes the one who does not obey the Son. The wrath of God abides on him.

We live in the present tense. The past cannot be recovered. And we cannot see the future yet. But we are in the present. And, right now, you either have eternal life, or else the wrath of God abides on you. There is no third choice.

During the days after the War between the States, there was a wealthy gentleman who spent his entire fortune in helping out young men who had served their country. A young man came to him one day, and he was forced to turn him away, explaining, "I wish that I could do something to help you, but I have helped so many who came before you that I must turn you away."

The young man handed him a letter. Opening it, the wealthy gentleman found that it had been written from his son. "Father," it began, "the bearer of this letter is my special friend. Please do for him as you would do for me were I to come home." The Son has given you such a letter. All that you need do is to claim it.