

## **John 3:22–30**

### **Introduction**

The last time we heard from John the Baptist was close to the end of chapter one when he was “standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus” (1:35-37). That’s when we were “handed off,” as it were, from John the Baptist to Jesus. This happened in Bethany, on the east side of the Jordan where John was baptizing (1:28; **see map on p. 7**). It was the very next day that Jesus decided to go to Galilee where He attended a wedding in Cana and then went down to Capernaum (1:43; 2:1, 12). After a few days in Capernaum, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Passover where He cleanses the temple and has a conversation at night with Nicodemus (2:13). We don’t know how long Jesus stayed in Jerusalem, but we read now in chapter three, verses 22-23:

**I. John 3:22** — After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.

So from the urban center of Jerusalem Jesus moves with His disciples out into the Judean countryside. One commentator suggests “somewhere in the Jordan plain, perhaps not... very far from Jericho” (Morris). Wherever the exact location was, we know what Jesus was doing there. John tells us that He “remained there with [His disciples] and was baptizing.”

This is the only place in any of the Gospels where we’re told that Jesus baptized and so we might wonder at first what this baptism was – especially compared to John’s baptism. It’s important to remember that in one fundamental way the message of John the Baptist and the message of Jesus was the same. We read in Matthew chapter three:

- Matthew 3:1–2 — In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

And then in Matthew chapter four:

- Matthew 4:17 — From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

To the extent that their preaching was the same, we can see that their baptisms were also the same. Both we’re baptisms of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Mk. 1:4-5) in preparation for the coming rule of Israel’s King and Messiah. But even given all this “sameness,” John was not the Messiah and Jesus was. This might help explain the note in chapter four that “Jesus Himself did not baptize, but only His disciples” (cf. 4:2). The King Himself did not baptize in order to prepare people for His rule, but His disciples did. Meanwhile, we read in verses 23-24:

**II. John 3:23–24** — John also was baptizing at Aion near Saleim, because there were many waters [many springs?] there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison).

We can't know with certainty the location of Aion near Saleim, but one possibility is about forty miles north of Jerusalem on the west side of the Jordan River. One commentator points out that in this location there are actually seven springs ("many waters") within a radius of a quarter mile (Morris). From what we'll read later in verse 26, we know that John has moved from "Bethany across the Jordan" (1:28) to the west side of the Jordan, and if the locations for both of these places is correct then he's also moved about twenty miles south. So now we have both John and Jesus baptizing at the same time in two different places.

The author of this Gospel adds this little note of explanation: "for John had not yet been put in prison." In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we never hear about any "Judean ministry" of Jesus such as we're seeing here in John. In Matthew, the first thing we read after the baptism and the temptation of Jesus is that Jesus withdrew into Galilee when He heard that John had been arrested (4:12). Apparently, John knew about these other Gospel accounts and so he makes sure his readers know that there was, in fact, a Judean ministry of Jesus prior to this arrest of John and Jesus' subsequent ministry in Galilee. But maybe there's still another reason that John adds this note of explanation.

If Jesus has now come on the scene and is, Himself, now baptizing and making disciples (cf. 4:1), why is John the Baptist still baptizing? There's a sense in which we could answer simply with John the Apostle: "Because he had not yet been put in prison." The **life work** of John the Baptist was to baptize with water in order that Jesus, the Messiah, might be revealed to Israel (1:31) – in order that Jesus might be made known in His saving power to a people made ready and prepared (1:23). Therefore, we conclude that to this point the life's work of John must not yet be finished.

As the readers of John's Gospel, *we* were "handed off" from John the Baptist to Jesus back in chapter one when Andrew and the "other disciple" left John to follow Jesus. But while we've been "handed off," as it were, and not seen or heard from John since chapter one, John is still preaching and baptizing – *not* as a "disciple" of Jesus, but rather as one who *belongs*, himself, to the old order of things and who's life's work is to prepare people and point people to the coming of the new order of things in Jesus. In other words, while their baptisms were the same, John was baptizing as the one called by God to be the last and greatest prophet of the *old* order while the disciples of Jesus (at least some of whom had left John to follow Jesus) were baptizing as those who now belonged already, in a sense, to that *new* order of things that was coming in Jesus. One commentator writes:

"The turning point in the history of salvation represented by Jesus, a turning point to which John [bore witness]... did not manifest itself in Jesus' public ministry as a [sharp]... break but rather as an increasingly more manifest fulfillment of the preparatory work of [John] the Baptist" (Ridderbos).

And so even as we see Jesus baptizing in the Judean countryside we also see John the Baptist still baptizing, perhaps some forty miles to the north, at Ainon near Saleim.

**III. John 3:25** — Now a dispute arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification.

“Purification,” here, refers to ritual or ceremonial purification with water. We saw the same word in chapter two, when, at the wedding in Cana there were six stone water jars... for the Jewish rites of purification” (2:6). But what were John’s disciples and this Jew arguing about? They certainly wouldn’t have been arguing about the purification rites prescribed in the Old Testament and probably not about any of the traditional purification rites of Judaism. We can assume from the next verse that their disagreement was connected in some way with John’s water baptism. So it seems most likely to me that this Jew was a member of one of the Jewish groups in Israel that practiced their own special ritual purifications. One commentator explains that some of these groups (cf. the Essenes) “bathed daily in cold water, with a view to purity” (Carson; cf. Morris). So my assumption is that these disciples were arguing for the superiority of John’s once-and-done baptism over all the repeated ritual purifications of these other religious groups in Judaism. The disciples of John were zealous for their teacher, and also for his baptism and the message that he preached. Only now, in arguing for the superiority of John’s baptism over the ritual purifications of these other Jewish groups, they’re carried so far in their zeal as to question in some sense even the baptizing ministry of Jesus. Their debate with the Jew ended, we read now in verse 26:

**IV. John 3:26** — 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.”

It should really be so hard for us to put ourselves in these disciples’ shoes. Notice how Jesus is looked at in the light of His relationship to John, rather than John in the light of his relationship to Jesus: “Rabbi, ***He who was with you... to whom you bore witness.***” The implication is that there’s a *sense* in which Jesus owes His baptizing ministry to John. Theirs is, after all, the same baptism, isn’t it? And they are preaching the same message of repentance in light of the nearness of the kingdom, aren’t they? And it was John, after all, who first paved the way for the “success” that Jesus was now seeing in His own ministry, wasn’t it? And yet now John is being gradually overshadowed and will soon be completely eclipsed by Jesus. Even granting that Jesus is the Messiah (and the disciples of John had to know in some sense that He was), shouldn’t He be giving more recognition to John? Shouldn’t Jesus be promoting more of John’s ministry? Even granting that Jesus is the Messiah, is it right that their teacher and Rabbi, the one they recognize as a great prophet from God, should fade into obscurity? That doesn’t seem right or fair to them at all, and so they’re resentful. They don’t even give Jesus His name or his title; instead, they say: “*He* who was with you... to whom you bore witness—look, *he* is baptizing, and *all* are going to *him*.” “All” is an exaggeration. It’s just their way of saying, “*More* are going to Him than to you” (cf. 4:1).

Can we identify to some extent, as sinners ourselves, with how these disciples of John are thinking and how they’re feeling? It’s one thing to say that **Jesus** is the Messiah. But does this mean that **John** should apparently have no place of honor, himself, in the Messiah’s kingdom?

We could put the question like this: Why, when John the Baptist must fade away into obscurity, should Jesus say to Peter (who was probably originally a disciple of John!): “Upon this rock [upon you, Peter, in your office as an Apostle] I will build my church” (Mat. 16:18)? Why couldn’t John the Baptist have been given that place in Jesus’ kingdom? Indeed, will he even have any place at all in the very kingdom that he was sent to herald and announce? None of this seems fair—or even right—to these disciples of John. Would it have seemed fair or right to us?

**V. John 3:27** — John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.”

If we could really grasp this one simple truth, could we even imagine the fruit it would bear in our lives? “A person cannot receive even **one thing** unless it is **given him from heaven.**” Notice how John speaks indefinitely of “a person.” In other words, this is a proverb with universal application expressing a truth that’s self-evident to anyone who has eyes to see. It’s just the “eyes to see” part that we need so much help with.

John’s disciples would have affirmed the truth of this “proverb” in theory, and even its universal application, but in this case they had failed to see *how* it should be applied. Hadn’t their master “received from heaven” the role of a mighty prophet of God who was called to go before the Messiah and prepare the way for His coming? But if this is what John had received from heaven, why was he not being accorded the recognition and the honor that belonged to such a calling? There’s an obvious “logic” here to our fallen minds and our fallen ways of thinking, and yet can we “see” how flawed this logic is?

If it was **from heaven** that John had **received** his role as a mighty prophet of God who was called to go before the Messiah and prepare the way for His coming, then what thought can one possibly have for honor or recognition? Even given the truth of the proverb that honor should be given to whom honor is due (cf. Rom. 13:7), that honor is never the concern of the one to whom it is due because the only reason it *is* “due” is that he himself has graciously, undeservedly received something from God. The Apostle Paul writes in Corinthians:

➤ 1 Corinthians 4:7 — What do you have that you did not *receive*? [Is there even a single thing?] If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

Why do you concern yourself with the honor that you are due? Why do you give any thought at all to the question of recognition? And yet do we really fully grasp what this will mean for John the Baptist? The issue for John’s disciples was not just the lack of honor and recognition, but rather that it appeared their master was fading away into a *final, ultimate* obscurity, like a fire that blazes up brightly for a moment and then goes out. How does this final, ultimate obscurity fit with what their master had received from heaven? Why did it look like he would not be receiving any place of honor—if even any place at all—in the Messiah’s coming kingdom?

If John’s disciples had really grasped the truth that “a person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven,” shouldn’t they be reevaluating, instead, *what it was* that their master had received? If he really did appear to be fading away, instead of causing

disappointment and even resentment, shouldn't this cause them to reevaluate what it was that their master had received from heaven in the first place? So John goes on to say to them:

**VI. John 3:28** — “You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’”

John's disciples have by their own words already given the solution to their “problem.” What was it they just said? “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, **to whom you bore witness...**” But had they forgotten what this witness was?

“I am not the Christ,” John reminded them, “but I have been sent before him.” They had heard, and yet not heard. They had not fully grasped who the Christ was (“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”; 1:29), and who John was in relation to the Christ (the one whose sandal strap he was not worthy to untie; 1:27). Maybe even more importantly, they had not yet grasped that the beginning *and end* of their master's place and calling in God's redemptive program was the revelation of *the Messiah* to Israel (1:31) – that *He* might be made known in His saving power to a people made ready and prepared (1:23). Isn't it true, then, that whatever may happen *after* John has fulfilled this calling is wholly irrelevant?

So far, John's disciples had failed to see not only the true glory of the Messiah to whom John bore witness, but also the true nature of what it was that John had received from heaven – and the result is that they are disappointed and even resentful. But John does see, and because he sees, He's filled to overflowing with joy. What a wonderful and beautiful (and instructive!) contrast! So John continues:

**VII. John 3:29** — “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.”

One commentator explains that in biblical times, the “friend of the bridegroom” was “responsible for many of the details of the wedding, and in particular it was he who brought the bride to the bridegroom” (Morris). So what is it that brings “great joy” to the friend of the bridegroom? It's not any recognition or honor that he is accorded as the friend of the bridegroom; instead, what brings him joy is the joy of the bridegroom. The joy that he has is standing by and watching and seeing the bridegroom receive his bride. Is he envious that it is not he who has the bride? The thought never enters his mind. Is he resentful that he hasn't been more highly honored? The thought never enters his mind. Far from being envious or resentful, he rejoices greatly (lit. “he rejoices with joy”)—at the bridegroom's voice – because what he hears in the bridegroom's voice is the confirmation of his own success. The joy he hears in the bridegroom's voice is his own joy. And so John the Baptist concludes:

“*Therefore* this joy of *mine* is now complete.” It was not given to John to be the bridegroom, but to be the friend of the bridegroom. Therefore, to the extent that he has been successful in his mission—to the extent that he has made ready *for the Messiah* a people prepared (cf. Lk. 1:17)—to that extent his joy is complete. There's nothing left that could make his joy more full. There's nothing left that could diminish or take away from his fullness of joy. In the case of John, this

includes the reality that the coming of the bridegroom and the successful completion of his own task will necessarily require that he himself fade away into obscurity.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel are pictured as God's wife or bride.

- Isaiah 54:5 (cf. Ezek. 16:8; Jer. 2:2) — 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.

But Israel was unfaithful to her husband.

- Jeremiah 3:20 — Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD.

And so the prophets foretold a day when God would betroth to Himself a purified and a faithful bride.

- Hosea 2:16–20 — And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me “My Husband,” and no longer will you call me “My Baal.” For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more... And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.
- Isaiah 62:5 — As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Israel, as the people of the Old Covenant, was a typological picture of this purified and faithful New Covenant bride, and Israel was also the people from out of which this New Covenant bride would first be taken. It's in this light of the progress of redemptive history—of God finally betrothing a bride to Himself in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy, and in faithfulness—that John understands his own role as the “friend of the bridegroom.” John is not the bridegroom; and *neither* was it given to John to be a part of God's New Covenant bride (cf. Mat. 11:11-13). John has done his part in making ready a people prepared for the coming of their Messiah—a bride prepared for the coming of the bridegroom—and now his appointed lot is to fade away into obscurity just as that old order of things, of which he himself is the final representative, was also fading away. And so here in the Gospel of John the last recorded words of John the Baptist are these:

**VIII. John 3:30** — “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

“He—as the one who is bringing in and establishing the new order of things—must increase, but I—as the final representative of the old order of things and the one who prepared the way for Him—must decrease.” This isn't about a voluntary humility on John's part, though this is a beautiful and powerful picture of the true humility that we should all have. This is about a redemptive-historical necessity. “He *must* increase, but I *must* decrease.” This is the way it *must* be and *will* be because of what *He* has received from heaven and because of what *I* have received from heaven.

Is there the faintest hint of complaint or even of sadness in John’s voice? It’s the exact opposite! In the increase of Jesus, even as he himself is left behind, his joy is made complete – unceasingly and inexhaustibly full. How full of joy, then, should we be, to whom it has been *given* to be part of that bride that God has betrothed to Himself in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy, and in faithfulness? How full of joy should we be who have *received from heaven* a place in the bride for whom Christ—the bridegroom—gave Himself up, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).

“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.” And yet *this* is what we have *received from heaven*. Should we ever, even for a single moment, give any thought whatsoever to our own honor or recognition? May it never be! It’s as we live out in faithfulness *what we have received* from heaven that now our own joy—“this joy of ours”—is made complete.

