

## John 3:22-36

### He Must Increase, I Must Decrease

**Overview:** John wrote his Gospel to convince curious but unbelieving Jews to come to faith in Jesus:

ESV **John 20:30-31** . . . these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Arguably, John was writing to Jewish unbelievers scattered throughout the Roman Empire (Hellenistic Jews). It is clear that John's readers were already familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures—something that would not have been true of the typical Gentile living in the Roman Empire. However, they were not familiar with geographical features of the Promised Land.

In a sense, evangelists like John had a public relations problem. The Judean religious establishment had already officially rejected Jesus. On the whole, the Jewish people of Judea had rejected him, too. Making matters worse, the Romans had executed Jesus as a revolutionary. Jews living outside Judea had doubtless heard rumors about Jesus, and John was writing to inform them who Jesus really was, why Jesus had been rejected, and to convince them that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

In today's passage, we'll see the role John the Baptist played in endorsing Jesus as Messiah.

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**\*\*\*\*Why did John pick a place called Aenon<sup>1</sup> to baptize people (3:22-24)?** Aenon means "fountain" or "spring."<sup>2</sup> Like Arizona, Judea was very arid, and he chose that location simply because water was plentiful there.

**When it comes to baptism, some Christians sprinkle, some pour, and some immerse. What does the amount of water suggest about John's mode of baptism (3:23)?** It hints that John's mode of baptism was by immersion. It does not take much water to sprinkle or even pour as a form of baptism. An entire army could be sprinkled with a wash tub of water. Even John Calvin, who practiced sprinkling, admitted that the reference to "plentiful" water indicates that John was "plunging the whole body beneath the water" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 130)!<sup>3</sup>

**In 3:22-23, "baptizing" is from *baptizo* (transliterated "baptize"). It remains an untranslated word in our English Bibles. If it were actually translated—rather than merely transliterated—what English word would appear here?** It means to immerse or to submerge (used of sunken ships). There are Greek words for sprinkle and pour, but

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced eh-non.

<sup>2</sup> JD Douglas, *New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Cole, "Lesson 19: A Lesson in Humility (John 3:22-30)", Bible.org. Accessed 12/27/2023.

they are not used here. **Joke:** When it comes to baptism, Baptists are all wet. A little dab won't do you!

**We've considered how John baptized people, now, why did John baptize people?**

**What was that about (3:23)?** Water baptism is the outer sign of an inward act. John's baptism symbolized was that a person had repented of his sins and was spiritually clean or pure. John did not baptize them so they could repent, but as a sign that they had already repented.

ESV **Matthew 3:11** I baptize you with water for repentance ...

**What does it mean to repent?** It is from *metanoia*, "a change of thinking." As such, it is a close parallel to faith (repentance and faith are opposite sides of the same coin). John the Baptist preached that men should repent from sin (**Matthew 3:6**) and believe in the One coming after him—Jesus (**Acts 19:4**).

ESV **Acts 19:4** ... John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.

**Believer's Baptism:** A different Gospel writer recorded that John refused to baptism some Jewish leaders who came for baptism because they had not repented. Baptism is only for believers, not unbelievers. In the New Testament, you only see people being baptized who are old enough to believe in Jesus (not babies). If you have not been baptized as a believer, but only had infant baptism, I would encourage you to get your baptism on the right side of your salvation

**Summary:** John's water baptism was the outward sign of an inward reality: repentance from sin. Christian baptism is the outward sign of the inward reality of both repentance and faith in Jesus. It is like an initiation rite into the new covenant community. It is not too far a stretch to say it symbolizes the washing away of one's sins. Others have compared it to a liquid grave: buried with Christ and raised to walk in newness of life. Water baptism, however, is not necessary in order to be saved:

ESV **1 Corinthians 1:17** Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel ...

Different from water baptism is the baptism of the Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit truly does save. John the Immerser said of Jesus:

ESV **Mark 1:8** I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

ESV **Galatians 3:27** ... as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

- **"after this" (3:22):** These baptisms happened after Jesus' visit to Jerusalem for the Passover. It was there that the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus took place wherein Nicodemus was told the importance of being born again. The necessity of being born again explains why the Sanhedrin rejected Jesus as Messiah:

ESV **John 3:3, 8** "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God ... The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

It was also on "this" Jerusalem visit that Jesus took a whip and drove the money-changers out of the temple and overturned their tables.

- **"Jesus ... was baptizing" (3:22):** John clarified in the next chapter that it was Jesus' disciples, not actually Jesus Himself, who did the baptizing:

ESV **John 4:2** ... Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples ...

This is like saying Frank Lloyd Wright built a house, even though he never drove in a single nail. He was, however, behind the project.

**What does the information in 3:23 tell us about John's original readers?** They were not familiar with Judean geographical features. Thus, they were lived outside of the Promised Land.

**What clue about the original readers does the information in 3:24 give us?** It tells us that his original readers were already familiar with the fact that John the Baptist had been imprisoned. John the Baptist was quite the sensation in first-century Judaism, and was thought of very highly.

**Why was John the Baptist put in prison (3:24)?** John's crime was in calling out sin in the lives of the local ruling elite regarding divorce and remarriage:<sup>4</sup>

ESV **Matthew 14:3-4** Herod ... seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."

**Example:** John situation was a lot like a someone standing outside an abortion clinic declaring that it is wrong to kill babies. He will be subject to all matter of curses, insults, threats, and even assault.

ESV **John 7:7** The world ... hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.

ESV **John 15:18** If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

**Application:** A great many of the Lord's servants have found themselves with a prison ministry! Humility recognizes that I am expendable and my role in God's program is temporary.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Herod was an Arab whose family had converted to Judaism. John thus expected them to live by the law of Moses.

<sup>5</sup> Cole, "John 3:22-30", accessed 12/27/23.

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**\*\*\*\*How did John respond to news that Jesus was more popular than he was (3:25-30)?** John was okay with it. He had realized all along that it is all about Jesus, not John. He was quite happy to play second fiddle.

**According to 3:25, what discussion arose between John's disciples and a certain Jew?** The discussion was over Jewish purification rites, and evidently how John's and Jesus' baptism related to it.

**Insight:** John's baptism was clearly associated with the idea purification from sins.

**What is the connection between 3:25 and 3:26? Why did the discussion about purification (3:25) trigger John's disciples to ask about John all the people going to Jesus for baptism (3:26)?** Evidently during this discussion questions were raised as to why so many were now going to Jesus for baptism instead of to John. They came to see what John thought about it.

**What is first reason John give to not be upset that all the people were going to Jesus (3:27)?** Everything anyone has is ultimately from God anyway. This is especially true of ministries. John was forerunner of the Messiah only because God gave John that ministry. It was nothing to be possessive of. Writing about the distribution of spiritual gifts, Paul revealed:

**NIV 1 Corinthians 12:11** All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

**Insight:** Success in ministry does not necessarily mean having the largest ministry. Success in ministry is to be faithful in what God gives us to do, exalt Christ, and encourage others to do the same.<sup>6</sup> John was a spiritually mature man:

**ESV Matthew 11:11** [Jesus] Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist ...

**Application:** Don't envy the ministry God has given others. Don't be discouraged when others succeed in ministry more than you have.

**Example:** Oscar Wilde wrote a fictional story about some demons trying to tormenting a monk in the Libyan desert. The monk easily shrugged off their evil temptations. The devil himself stepped forward to give them a lesson. "What you do is too crude," he said. "Permit me for one moment." He then whispered to the holy man, "Your brother has just been made Bishop of Alexandria." Suddenly, a look of malignant envy clouded the once-serene face of the hermit. Then the devil turned to the imps and said, "That is the sort of thing which I should recommend."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cole, "John 3:22-30", accessed 12/27/2023.

<sup>7</sup> "Envy", Preaching.org. Accessed 12/27/2023

**D.A Carson:** “Deep discontent over God’s wise, sovereign disposition of people and things ... betray not only unbelief ... but the worse form of the perennial human sin, the arrogance that wants to be God and stand where God stands.”<sup>8</sup>

**\*\*\*\*The second reason John gave was in 3:28. John called his own disciples to the witness stand. What was their testimony?** They themselves heard John say that he himself was not the Christ, but rather was simply the warm-up act. John was very humble:

ESV **John 1:15** John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'"

**\*\*\*\*What is the point of the wedding analogy John draw in 3:29?** A wedding is about the bride and groom. The best man in a wedding rejoices in the bride and groom. Jesus was the groom. John was merely the best man. John thus had complete joy in “all” the people going to Jesus for baptism, rather than to John.

**What did John mean when he said that Jesus must increase, but John must decrease (3:30)?** John knew he would work himself out of a ministry as Jesus’ popularity increased. Earlier, John the Baptist spoke of Jesus as:

ESV **John 1:27** ... the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

ESV **John 1:6-7** There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.

**Isaac Watts:** “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ, my God!”<sup>9</sup>

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**\*\*\*\* In the last paragraph of this chapter (3:31-36), the narrative appears to switch from John the Baptist over to John the Apostle (there were not quotation marks in the Greek, so translators have to make an educated guess). What is the fate of whoever does not obey Jesus (3:31-36)?** He is subject to the wrath of God.

**What does “wrath” mean (3:36)?** The Greek is *orgé*, “anger, indignation, judgement.”<sup>10</sup>

ESV **Romans 1:18** ... the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men ...

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<sup>8</sup> Carson, *John*, 211.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wonderous Cross”, 1707.

<sup>10</sup> Bauer, Arndt, *A Gingrich Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 578.

ESV **Romans 2:5** ... because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath ...

ESV **Romans 2:8** ... for those who ... obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

ESV **John 8:24** ... unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.

ESV **Revelation 21:8** ... as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

**Universalism—Not:** Universalism is the false doctrine that everyone will be in heaven. **John Piper** wrote, “Bad theology dishonors God and hurts people. Churches that sever the root of truth may flourish for a season, but they will wither eventually or turn into something besides a Christian church.”<sup>11</sup>

**What’s the point of 3:31?** That only someone like Jesus, who came from the Great Beyond, could speak authoritatively about Heaven.

NIV **John 8:58** "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

**What sad conclusion was stated in 3:32?** Jesus bore witness to what he saw and heard up in the unseen realm, and yet for the most part “no one receives his testimony” (a generalization).

ESV **John 1:9-11** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world ... the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

ESV **Romans 9:27** ... Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,

ESV **Romans 10:21** ... of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

**\*\*\*\*What did John declare about whoever does receive Jesus’ testimony (3:33-34)?**

Verse 3:33 must be connected with **3:34**. To believe Jesus is to believe God. The one who receives Jesus’ testimony sets his seal on the reality that what God says is true. To listen to Jesus is to listen to the voice of God.<sup>12</sup>

**\*\*\*\*In 3:34-35, what did John declare about Jesus? 1)** Jesus spoke the words of God, **and 2)** He was given the Spirit without measure. **3)** The Father loves the Son, **and 4)** gave all things into His hands.

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<sup>11</sup> Justin Taylor, “Rob Bell: Universalist?”, TheGospelCoalition.org. Accessed December 29, 2023.

<sup>12</sup>William Barclay, “The Gospel of John”, Vol., *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 137.

ESV **John 5:20** ... the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.

**Review: With what sobering words did John conclude in 3:36?**

**Based on 3:36, who has eternal life?** Whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life!

**Those who do not obey Jesus shall not see life. What sense do they not “obey” Jesus (3:36)?** A person obeys by believing, since God commands belief:

ESV **Acts 17:30** ... God ... commands all people everywhere to repent ...

ESV **2 Thessalonians 1:8** ... vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

**Secondary Application:** There are many who claim to believe in Jesus, but their disobedience to His commands reveals that they do not really believe:

ESV **James 2:14-26** What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead ... You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder ... as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

James described the quality of a faith that saves: it produces obedience. We are not saved by faith plus works, but rather by a faith that works.

**Examples:** **1)** Adrian Rogers said that if your faith won't get you to church on Sunday, it won't get you to heaven either. **2)** The Bible says just as the church submits to Christ, that wives should submit to their husbands, as to the Lord. If a woman claims to be a believer, yet refuses to submit to her husband, she does not obey Jesus. She has reason to question her salvation.

### So What?

**How did John 3:22-36 serve to help persuade John's readers to believe in Jesus?**

Among first-century, Jews, John the Baptist was well respected. This passage shows that John the Baptist believed in Jesus as the Christ, that Jesus was sent from God, and that Jesus uttered the true words of God. John's endorsement was a pretty good one! As great as John was, Jesus surpassed John the Baptist and any baptism he represented.<sup>13</sup>

**Secondary Applications:** Do not ever compete with someone else who is preaching the gospel of Christ. Follow John's example and cease any jealousy over another who has a more successful ministry.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Carson, *John*, 209.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Totter, "John 3:22-26 John the Baptist Decreases and Jesus Increases." Teaching notes 06/09/2019.

**ESV Philippians 1:15-18a** Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

John is a great example of humility.

**ESV James 4:6b** God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

**What can we learn about water baptism from this passage?** Biblical baptism is by immersion, and it is symbolic of the purification that comes from repenting and believing in Jesus.

**What does 3:22-36 reveal about who has eternal life versus who is liable to God's wrath?** Whoever believes has eternal life. Whoever does not obey remains under God's wrath.

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