

That You May Continue to Believe...



AN EXPOSITION OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

John's Final Testimony John 3:22-36

In this morning's lesson, we have set before us the following idea. **Jesus surpassed and replaced His magnificent forerunner, John the Baptist, and any rite of baptism or purification he might have represented¹.** Now from what we have seen in the last few weeks that is almost exactly what you would expect. You will remember when we studied the section where Jesus turned the water into wine that Jesus filled up the stone water pots of purification and then turned the water into wine. The significance there was almost exactly the same as it is here. Jesus was demonstrated the completion or fulfillment of what went before Him.²

In one sense, He demonstrated, at Cana, that He was the fulfillment of the law and the ultimate means of purification before God. He did that in a symbolic act where He filled up the requirements of the law and offered the promise of the Spirit of God.³ So there is a sense in which you could say Jesus demonstrated His superiority over Jewish ceremonial law. **When He cleansed the temple, He demonstrated His superiority to it by promising to replace it as the place**

where God and man could meet. Jesus prophetically offered Himself as the new holy place, not tainted by the sinful materialism of men, where God and man would at last be reconciled.

In the story with Nicodemus, we saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament promise of cleansing found in water and in wind in a way that showed Him to be the very wisdom of God come down from heaven. But even beyond that...**He showed Himself not only to possess a true knowledge of God that dwarfed the cumulative wisdom and understanding of all that Judaism possessed.**

Now there is a sense in which today's passage builds right on top of all that has gone before. So far, the author of the Gospel of John has shown Jesus to superior to:

- 1) the ceremonial law,
- 2) the Temple,
- 3) the wisdom of Judaism and finally to...
- 4) purification and baptism of John the Baptist.

In one other sense, however, we see in this story with John the Baptist the absolute joy with which all true Jews should have received Him. You see John the Baptist was not just another character that Jesus bested; he was the archetype for how every Jew should have responded to Jesus and His ministry.⁴ That is why John the Baptist has such a prominent place here in the beginning of John's Gospel.

Let me say that another way. I think the reason John the Baptist plays such a prominent role here in the early part of John is because he represents the kind of reception that believing Jews ought to have given Jesus. And you remember, I hope that we have been making the point that John's Gospel was written primarily to encourage those first century Jews who were waffling between Jesus and the synagogue to put their trust in Him. That is, John's Gospel was written to encourage them to continue believing in Him.

Of course, the message of the Gospel of John is bigger than that. It does have application for us today. But that application is not far removed from its original intention. Just as it was written to encourage Jewish believers to continue trusting in Jesus so it encourages us to keep on trusting in Him. It sustains us when we are weary and it sustains us when pressures are pushing us away from the faith. It can do that because we have been indwelt with that same Spirit that our Lord promised when He turned the water into wine.

Now there are lessons of humility to be learned as well. Clearly, John understood his position of subordination to Jesus⁵. But for me, or any expositor, to focus on the concept of humility in and of itself would do serious harm to John's authorial intent. John is not just calling us to behave in a humble manner but to rightly worship the one who has come down from heaven and secured our salvation. He is not calling us to an exaggerated self-deprecation; instead, he is calling us to evaluate who we are in contrast to Christ and to give Him only what He deserves, our full and careful devotion and loyalty.

Still in one sense, John's purpose is to help us rightly see ourselves. Once when I was in seminary, Larry Danner and I went over to see Dr. J. Vernon McGee in

person at a Dallas church. The pastor of the church, who was an old friend of his, introduced him this way.

“It is my pleasure to introduce to you this evening Dr. J. Vernon McGee. He is a popular author, a gifted speaker and a dear friend. I should like to add that in spite of his many successes and achievements, Dr. McGee is a humble man. He wife assures me that he has a lot to be humble about.”

Now, brothers and sisters that is the attitude the Spirit of God is trying to bring us to here in John’s Gospel. He is trying to get us to see that in comparison to Jesus all other things are incomplete, imperfect and insufficient. He is trying to get us to see that Jesus fills up every void, every failure, every empty spot with the beauty of His person and His work. The Holy Spirit wants us to be so captivated with Jesus that when we think of any other thing we see its inability to measure up to Him. He is trying to get us to be humble but not by beating us to a frazzle but by showing us what genuine beauty, holiness and righteousness are really like. He is trying to engender in us the response of the small East Texas boy that once tugged at Dr. McGee’s coattail and said with tears in his eyes, **“Mister, I never knew Jesus was so wonderful.”** You see it only when we think that way, when we see Jesus rightly, that we will gain the endurance to keep on believing in Him. It is only then that the Holy Spirit will make real to us the truth of Peter’s statement,

^{ESV} John 6:68...Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,

Now all that having been said, let’s dig into the text.

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

The scene we are to envision here is a scene that took place after Passover. Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem and went out into the countryside to spend some time together. The construction of the verbs “**spent time**” and “**baptized**” tells us that they were repeatedly doing those things. They were constantly spending time together and they were constantly baptizing. There are two things that I think you have to keep in mind. First, at this point there may have only been five or six disciples. Secondly, they had not come to fully understand Jesus or to really even know Him very well. The time they spent together was important for what was yet to come.

Beyond that, it is important to see that they were doing a lot of baptizing. They were constantly baptizing people. This is the only place in the gospels where we find that Jesus and His disciples baptized anyone and we learn at the beginning of chapter 4 that Jesus did not actually do any baptizing Himself. Now, that leads us to speculate as to why that might have been the case. But it is not something that should keep us very long for John has already given us the answer.

^{ESV} **John 1:33**...**I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'**

You see Jesus did not baptize with water because He wanted it understood that the baptism with which He was concerned was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We are not talking about a wild-eyed charismatic ecstatic baptism either. We are

talking about that regenerative act of the Holy Spirit that gives us a new nature from on high and enables us to respond to the gospel in faith.

Now look at verses 23-24.

^{ESV} **John 3:23**...John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized ²⁴ (for John had not yet been put in prison).

Apparently, John the Baptist was not very far away. The places that are mentioned Aenon and Salim are unknown to us today⁶. However, it should be noted that the place was a place where there were many waters. Some older commentators have argued that this carries with it an implicit argument for a baptism by immersion as opposed to that by effusion of sprinkling. That is, they argue that much water or depth of water was needed in order to baptize people properly. Certainly that is possible. On the other hand, the Greek text literally says “many waters” and not “much water.” Still it can be argued both ways and to become burdened down by that would cause us to miss the point of the passage.

You see the main emphasis in these two verses occurs not in where John baptized but the results he obtained. Verse 23 tells us that people were constantly coming to him to be baptized. Now I want you to think about that. Jesus and His disciples were baptizing and John and his disciples were baptizing what is the potential problem that might occur when the two groups drew close together⁷? Of course, the issue that would have come us is to which of these two men should I go? That is what we find in verses 25-26.

^{ESV} **John 3:25**...Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification⁸. 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."

Now, I have to tell you that verse 25 is the cause of no small disagreements. Here's why. Some ancient texts have the word "Jew" (singular) and others have the word "Jews" (plural). The various ancient texts are pretty evenly divided so it hard to tell which is the proper reading. That is not really much of an issue. Here's the issue. Some scholars say that an argument with a certain Jew (the word "certain" is not actually in the text rather the text just read "a Jew") doesn't connect very well with goes on in verse 26. However, if you changed the word "Jew" to "Jesus" it would make perfect sense. You see then you could say that John's disciples got into an argument with Jesus over the nature of baptism and that argument caused John's disciples to run back to John to complain about Jesus and His success. However, there is one small problem with doing that. There is not one single manuscript in the world that reads Jesus in that spot.

Here's what we do know, "an unnamed Jew" got into an argument with John's disciples about baptism and cleansing and the even the nature of cleansing and that argument cause them to look up and take note of the fact that Jesus was baptizing more people than John the Baptist.

In first century Israel, there were several groups that practiced things like ritual washings or baptisms. Each group has its own selective type of ritual and it is not hard to see how each group found its own practice an issue over which to divide fellowship. We get a sense of that from the New Testament.

^{ESV} **Mark 7:4**...and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)

^{ESV} **Luke 11:38**...The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. ³⁹ And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

And we get a sense of that from first century sources like Josephus.

And (writing of the Essenes) as for their piety towards God, it is very extraordinary; for before sun-rising they speak not a word about profane matters, but put up certain prayers which they have received from their forefathers, as if they made a supplication for its rising. After this ...they labor with great diligence till the fifth hour. After which they assemble themselves together again into one place; and when they have clothed themselves in white veils, they then bathe their bodies in cold water.⁹

You see with each one of these groups is a ritual designed to cleanse or wash away the defilement of sin. Each group thought their ritual was better and each group used their ritual as the standard by which to judge other groups. So here the disciples of John got wrapped up in an argument over the nature of ceremonial cleansing and when they looked up they noticed Jesus had more people coming to Him than did John.

You can imagine what a shock that must have been for them. After all hadn't Jesus come to John for baptism? Didn't that indicate something of a subordinate position? At any rate, it greatly irritated John's disciples.

^{ESV} **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."

Now, of course, it wasn't completely true. It was hyperbole. Verse 23 told us that people were constantly coming to both John and Jesus. But to the disciples of John it must have seemed like everyone was going over to Jesus. Now let me ask you a question, **"What was it the disciples of John wanted John to do?"**

It seems clear to me that they wanted John to somehow admonish Jesus or speak out against Jesus or limit Jesus so that He would not be so effective. They wanted the status and the numbers and the recognition that came with being the only game in town. You can see that their thinking was exactly like the thinking of the world.

I remember when I was a kid and Roger Maris had the opportunity to break Babe Ruth's single season homerun record people despised him for it. They taunted him and mocked him and threatened him. To them they felt like it was somehow an invasion of sacred territory. People acted like Maris was the devil himself.

Anyway, it seems like there is some of that going on here. But notice John's response.

^{ESV} **John 3:27**...John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is 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.'

I think there are two elements to John's response. First he says, "**Look whatever we have, whatever ministry or gift we possess is the gift of God and is sovereignly administered.**" Now to me that sounds exactly like what Jesus told Nicodemus earlier. You remember Jesus said, "**To see the kingdom of God a man must be born from above. That is, he must be born of the Spirit who sovereignly decides on His own where He goes and what He does.**"

Of course, that fits well with what Paul would say later first to the Ephesians...

^{ESV} **Ephesians 4:7**...But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

...and then to the Corinthians.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 4:7**...For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

Now, I am not apt to keep on emphasizing a point but I think this is one place where I can do that and do so in good conscience.

The construction of John 3:27 is exactly the same as John 1:3. Let me translate it for you from Greek.

John answered and said, "A man is not able to receive, not one thing, unless it is given to him out of heaven.)

All things became through Him, and apart from Him became, not one thing, which has become.

Here's the point John is making, to whatever degree Jesus made everything that exists it is to that degree that we receive what we have from heaven.

To whatever degree Jesus made rocks and trees and the sky and molecules and atoms and quasars and black holes to that exact same degree we receive what we have spiritually from God's good hand. So I would put it like this, **"What is there that exists that Jesus did not make? No one thing. What is there that we possess spiritually that we did not receive? No one thing."**

Now, it may be that you may not care for the doctrine of God's sovereignty. I certainly can understand that. What you cannot do either intellectually, theologically or textually is argue that John disliked it. To John, whatever a man receives he receives at God's hand. That is what the text says.

Secondly, John gets right to the point, and this is what he says: **"Look I told you right off, I am not the Christ. I am not Him; I was sent to go ahead of Him."**

Now if you weren't here early on in our introduction to John, I have to tell you this is just more of the same of what John said earlier. In that section that runs from John 1:19-51, he said it lots of different ways. He said, **"I am not the Christ; I am not the prophet; I am not Elijah."** He said, **"I am just a voice saying get ready He is coming."**

But here John is going to change his figure of speech and he is going to change it to something so lovely and gentle that anybody can understand it¹⁰. He is going

to say something to the effect that, **“I am just like the best man at wedding. How can I not be happy that the groom is with His bride?”**

Look at verse 29.

^{ESV} **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. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."**

Now in the first century the best man, the friend of the bridegroom, was in many ways the most important man at the wedding. He took care of endless details and then at just the right time he delivered the bride into the arms of the bridegroom. It was at that point that he faded into oblivion. His joy was seeing the joy of the groom. When that was done, he was done. That is the point the Baptist is making here. He is saying, **“This is what I have longed for. This is the thing that I have worked and preached and hoped and prayed for. This is the fulfillment of all that I am about. How can you expect me to be sad? This is what was supposed to happen. Now He will be exalted and I will fade into the background.”**

Now, I should add that there is one other word in this verse that bears some reflection. It is the word “must” in verse 30. It is a word that is used often in John to reflect divine necessity. It can be translated **“it is necessary”** or it can be translated as it is here as **“must”**.

It is used in John 20:9...

^{ESV} **John 20:9**...for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

It is used in John 10:16...

^{ESV} **John 10:16**...And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

And finally, it is used in John 3:14....

^{ESV} **John 3:14**...And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

Now in each of those cases I think you can get a picture of the nature of divine necessity attached to the event. It is as John is saying, **“There are some things that absolutely, positively must happen. The Son of Man must be lifted up. The person who wants to see the kingdom of God must be born again. Jesus must go after and get His Gentile followers and John the Baptist must pass into obscurity while Jesus takes up His rightful place of prominence.”**

Oh, that we could learn that lesson. It is not an issue of fatalism. It is an issue of spiritual understanding and maturity. I cannot imagine how many problems would be solved in the church today, if we could come to the realization that the world does not, in fact, revolve around us. I cannot think of how many hurt feelings, how many wounded egos could be healed and salvaged over if only we could come to realize that it is His kingdom, His church, His people and not ours. John the Baptist knew and understood that and was glad.¹¹ But others have understood that as well.

I was reminded of that this week as I read a brief story about Hudson Taylor.

Hudson Taylor, the famous founder of the China Inland Mission, was scheduled to speak at a Large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as "**our illustrious guest.**" Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message by saying, "**Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master.**"¹²

Now brothers and sisters, we have an obligation to be about the task of learning for ourselves and of teaching our children our right standing in the kingdom of God. That means that we are to teach our children the glory of our adoption as the sons and daughters of God and at the same time we are to teach them the absolute supremacy of the Lord Jesus. That means we are to be about the task of advancing His kingdom. He has no obligation to advance ours.¹³

And that task is something that can be taught. I know it can be. Let me explain. Some fifteen years, I was setting in chapel at Dallas Seminary one morning a few minutes before the service started. I was enjoying my time when a man a few years older than me came down the aisle and sat directly in front of me. I figured he was a guest. Even in those days, there weren't many students older than me. I thought especially since my wife had just recently chided me for not being very friendly that I ought to speak to this older man. I tapped him on the shoulder and introduced myself. "**Hi I'm Tom, Tom Browning. I don't think I've seen you before are you a visitor.**"

“Well, Tom” he said, “it’s a pleasure to meet you. Yes I am visiting some friends here in Dallas and I thought I might drop by and see the seminary. My name is Jay.”

We talked on for a few minutes and I told him I hoped he enjoyed the service but that I wasn’t quite sure who the speaker was going to be. He told me he intended to enjoy the day and that the speaker really didn’t make that much difference to him. A few minutes later Dr. Walvoord stood up called us to order and introduced our chapel speaker for the morning. He was a man that had grown up in China. He was a man who had been converted while locked away in a Japanese prison camp as a young boy. He was the grandson of the founder of the China Inland Mission. His name was Hudson Taylor III, J. Hudson Taylor III. The “Jay” in front of me stood up and walked up to the platform and delivered an exceptional talk.

I nearly laughed out loud. He was so self-effacing, so humble, so down to earth. But you can see why. He had been taught that the world did not revolve around him. Just as his grandfather had determined that he was the minor servant of an illustrious master, so J. Hudson Taylor III had also determined that he too was a minor servant. He had learned that all things that really mattered revolved around Jesus and the advance of His kingdom. Now if we keep all that in mind it is easy to see how verses 31-36 make up another editorial comment just like the one that occurred at the end of the Nicodemus narrative. Here’s what I mean. John the Baptist was speaking in verse 27-30 but he ended what he had to say in verse 30. I think the other John, John the Beloved author of this gospel took over the story at that point.

^{ESV} **John 3:31**...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.

Doesn't that remind of John the Baptist earlier testimony.

^{ESV} **John 1:30**...This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'

Why was he before me?

^{ESV} **John 1:2**...He was in the beginning with God.

And we have His own testimony...

^{ESV} **John 3:13**...No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man..

Now what did He do when He came into the world...and what was the response?

^{ESV} **John 3:32**...He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.

Still, some have believed and those that have believed, those that have been born again, have witnessed to the reality of His beauty and what He has done.

^{ESV} **John 3:33**...Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.

Now, one such man was the Baptist. There were others. There was Nathanael and Peter and Andrew and Philip and there would be many more. Now, why would there be others? There would be others because this Jesus, the holy incarnate Son of God, speaks the words of God with measure.

^{ESV} **John 3:34**...For he whom God has sent utters 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 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.

Now why would he end this section with this particular editorial comment? He was doing so because he was trying to encourage those first century Jews who were waffling in their loyalty to Jesus and considering going back to the synagogue. He was trying to remind them that a life of genuine faith cannot be a self-absorbed life. Spiritual depth and understanding, the kind that John the Baptist possessed, exist only in those who realize that life is not about their comfort or even their advancement. Spiritual depth and understanding and meaning exist only in those who realize their life and their joy consist in the joy of the bridegroom. Their joy comes from His joy and His joy comes from seeing His bride and our duty is bring that about and in doing so to long for the joyful sound of His voice.

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 209.

² C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction with Notes and Commentary on the Greek Text*, (London: S.P.C.K, 1967), 184. "The reference is not to the baptism performed by John, or to that performed by Jesus, but to Jewish purification in general. For this reason it is not made precise; John cares (and perhaps knows) little about the details of Jewish ablutions. His intention (still with v. go in view) is to show that John the Baptist great though he is, nevertheless belongs within the world of Judaism, which Jesus will supersede (Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist: yet he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he—Matt. 11.11; Luke 7.28). Neither John nor the Jew is ο ανωθεν ερχομενος

(v. 31), and their καθαρισμος can at best point forward to the life-giving activity of the Son of God (v. 36)."

³ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 71. "But the reference to their 'purificatory practice' here gives the clue to the spiritual meaning of the present narrative. The water, provided for purification as laid down by Jewish law and custom, stands for the whole ancient order of Jewish ceremonial, which Christ was to replace by something better."

⁴ Then there is Bultmann. The following quote speaks for itself. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 167. "It ought not to be difficult to see that this scene (vv. 22–26) is a *literary composition*, reflecting the rivalry between the sects of the Baptist and Jesus, nor to see that the Baptist who bears witness to Jesus is a figure from the Christian interpretation of history. The question however remains, whether the scene is a *free composition* of the Evangelist's or whether it is based on some kind of *tradition*. Taken as a whole 3.22-26 gives the impression of being the Evangelist's own composition, and in any case the utterance of the Baptist's disciples,"

⁵ There are tons of illustrations that might effectively portray something of John's humility. Among them: Norman McGowan, *My Years With Winston Churchill*, Souvenir Press, London. Winston Churchill was once asked, "Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?" "It's quite flattering," replied Sir Winston. "But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big."

Our Daily Bread. A truly humble man is hard to find, yet God delights to honor such selfless people. Booker T. Washington, the renowned black educator, was an outstanding example of this truth. Shortly after he took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he was walking in an exclusive section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her. Because he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A little girl recognized him and later revealed his identity to the lady.

The next morning the embarrassed woman went to see Mr. Washington in his office at the Institute and apologized profusely. "It's perfectly all right, Madam," he replied. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend." She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John (Rvd.)* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 210. Also see Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 144. The (new) place where John's baptized ("Aenon near Salim") cannot be identified with certainty, though it is clear from vs. 26 that it was on the west side of the Jordan.

According to an ancient Greek tradition the Salim referred to here was in the northern part of the Jordan valley, in the watery plain of Beth Shean (Scythopolis).¹²⁰ But other locations to the south have been considered.¹²¹ Some believe the reference is symbolic: Aenon (= “spring”) near Salim (“salvation”), with Aenon understood as the place where Jesus lived. But though the Evangelist sometimes refers to the symbolic meaning of the name of an actual place (cf. 9:7), there is no such allusion here, nor is the name fictitious, since such symbolism would have been attached to the place where Jesus baptized. And the symbolic interpretation that has been suggested is too far-fetched for us to attribute it to the Evangelist.

⁷ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 144. He writes: “But from the outset it could escape no one that Jesus was very different from John and that in his preaching and baptism he had much more to offer than his predecessor. The difference manifested itself not only in their outer appearance and public conduct (cf. Mt. 11: 18ff.) but above all in the authority with which, both in words and miraculous deeds, Jesus proclaimed the richly salvific significance of the kingdom that was at hand — which was undoubtedly why so many more people came to him than to John (vs. 26; cf. 4:1). In this connection perhaps some light is cast on the remarkable statement in 4:2 that not Jesus himself but his disciples baptized: by not baptizing Jesus immediately distinguished himself from John, even while he sought to maintain continuity with his forerunner through his disciples’ baptizing. But for them as well their activity as disciples of Jesus would in time not be linked with the forerunner’s baptism but would rather become *their* baptism — mandated to them by Jesus on the basis of his universal authority — in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:16-20).”

⁸ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18:5:2. He writes, “Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God’s displeasure to him.”

⁹ Flavius Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book 2, Chapter 8, 5. Josephus continues, “And after this purification is over, they every one meet together in an apartment of their own, into which it is not permitted to any of another sect to enter; while they go, after a pure manner, into the dining-room, as into a certain holy temple, and quietly set themselves down; upon which the baker lays them loaves in order; the cook also brings a single plate of one sort of food, and sets it before

every one of them; but a priest says grace before meat; and it is unlawful for any one to taste of the food before grace be said. The same priest, when he hath dined, says grace again after meat; and when they begin, and when they end, they praise God, as he that bestows their food upon them; after which they lay aside their [white] garments, and betake themselves to their labors again till the evening; then they return home to supper, after the same manner; and if there be any strangers there, they sit down with them. Nor is there ever any clamor or disturbance to pollute their house, but they give every one leave to speak in their turn; which silence thus kept in their house appears to foreigners like some tremendous mystery; the cause of which is that perpetual sobriety they exercise, and the same settled measure of meat and drink that is allotted them, and that such as is abundantly sufficient for them."

He also writes in *Life of Josephus*, ¶ 2, "These sects are three: — The first is that of the Pharisees, the second that Sadducees, and the third that of the Essenes, as we have frequently told you; for I thought that by this means I might choose the best, if I were once acquainted with them all; so I contented myself with hard fare, and underwent great difficulties, and went through them all. Nor did I content myself with these trials only; but when I was informed that one, whose name was Banus, lived in the desert, and used no other clothing than grew upon trees, and had no other food than what grew of its own accord, and bathed himself in cold water frequently, both by night and by day, in order to preserve his chastity, I imitated him in those things, and continued with him three years. So when I had accomplished my desires, I returned back to the city, being now nineteen years old, and began to conduct myself according to the rules of the sect of the Pharisees, which is of kin to the sect of the Stoics, as the Greeks call them."

¹⁰ Ridderbos, 147. "This relationship between John and Jesus is now elaborated with the aid of a wedding metaphor. The point of comparison is the difference between the bridegroom and "the friend of the bridegroom." The bridegroom is the principal person because "he has the bride." The "friend," familiar from the Jewish life of the day, is the one who both before and during the wedding assists the bridegroom in everything having to do with the wedding. His goal is achieved and his happiness is complete³² only, when at the feast, standing by the bridegroom,³³ he can witness the bridegroom's unconcealed joy.

It is not merely with resignation therefore that John witnesses Jesus' success among the people; it is rather a sense of full and unmixed joy that fills him when he sees that his work of preparation has reached its intended goal. All that is now left for him to do is to withdraw like the friend of the bridegroom. By way of conclusion that is now succinctly expressed: "He must increase, but I must decrease." This is the divinely ordered, salvation-historical "must" to which John refers (see the comments above on 3:14). John stands at the border of two worlds, two dispensations (cf. Mt. 11:11-13). The old has run its course; the time of fulfillment has come, in which, the more radiantly the rising."

¹¹ B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1954), 59. "The answer lies in the simple explanation of the essential relation between the Forerunner and the Christ, drawn from the universal truth. When this is once apprehended all possibility of rivalry is gone. The message which was brought to John by his disciples as a complaint, in his eyes crowns his proper joy."

¹² Warren Wiersbe, Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers, 243.

¹³ Philip W. Comfort, & Wendell C. Hawley, *Opening the Gospel of John* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1994), 59. “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven (NRSV)—John’s reply to his disciples was the response of a spiritual man who knew his place in God’s plan. He knew that a man is not able to do anything unless it has been given to him from heaven, that is, from God. Therefore, it would have been foolish to strive against the heavenly will. If all men were going to Christ, then all men *should* go to Christ. John’s statement is one that takes a lifetime to learn and appropriate.”