

“He Must Increase, but I Must Decrease.”

John 3:22-30 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. <sup>23</sup> John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized <sup>24</sup> (for John had not yet been put in prison).*

*<sup>25</sup> Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. <sup>26</sup> 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.” <sup>27</sup> John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

– John 3:22-30, ESV

### **Introduction: Is Life a Test, a Game, a Competition, a Crisis or a Gift?**

What is life? How do you most commonly think about it? Growing up, my dad would sometimes say to me, “Well, according to the Christian view, this life is just a test anyway.” He wasn’t advocating for what he thought the Christian view was, as he himself was agnostic at the time, but he had been raised in a Christian home, and this is what he thought the Christian view was.

Do you think life is a test? Some people say life is just a game. The great philosopher David Lee Roth said, “Remember, life is just a game and none of us gets out alive.”

A game can be seen as a type of test or as a competition. Some people believe life is a competition and they have strict categories of and criteria for the winners and losers in life’s competition.

Other people see life as a crisis, a series of urgent, pressing decisions and demanding deadlines that seem impossible to meet.

I actually think the best biblical perspective to have on life is to see life as a gift. If God is truly God and the world is His, then our lives are given to us by God. More importantly, if we belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ, we have His assurance that life is a gift from Him in which everything is ordered by His providence for our true and eternal good.

What difference does it make which one of these pictures of life we choose? Seeing life as a game keeps us from understanding that life is truly valuable and is to be taken seriously. On the other hand, seeing life as a test, a competition or a crisis causes enormous stress as we’re

constantly concerned with whether or not we're passing the test, winning the competition or making the right decisions under pressure in the crisis.

Life is a gift. Today, we're looking at a time when John the Baptist's disciples thought they were facing a great crisis. John showed His wisdom and humility when he responded by reminding them that everything in life is a gift. Let's see if we can't learn the same lesson and learn to see with the same eyes of faith that helped John the Baptist see the truth so clearly.

### **A. An Unusual Ministry Overlap (vv. 22-24)**

Our passage today begins by telling us of an unusual ministry overlap. After Jesus had spent some time in Jerusalem with His disciples, clearing out the Temple and speaking with Nicodemus, He led His disciples out of the city into the Judean countryside, where Jesus was preaching and His disciples were baptizing people. At the same time, John the Baptist was baptizing people north in Aenon near Salim. "Aenon" means "springs," so John is at a place of springs near Salim to the north near Galilee. So, Jesus and John are ministering about 40-50 miles apart from each other and each of them are drawing significant crowds to hear their preaching.

I've always wondered why John the Baptist was still preaching now that Jesus had come and been baptized and had begun His earthly ministry. But John the Baptist knew that his ministry calling was given to him by God, and so he was not going to abandon his post and stop calling people to repentance until God Himself removed him. This shows remarkable dedication to his calling.

I am also always tempted to think of how hard this must have been for John. To be called to a ministry where your whole job is to be the forerunner for someone else could be hard in itself. Then, to be called to remain in your ministry even after the guy you've been preparing the way for has arrived could be even more difficult. Many people began to look at John and Jesus as rival wilderness prophets, and this could have been very discouraging for John. But whenever I think like this, pondering how hard ministry life must've been for John, I am not thinking with the same remarkable wisdom and humility John himself demonstrated.

### **B. A Misguided Complaint (v. 26)**

John the Baptist's disciples struggled with some of the same thoughts I've had about John. Some of his disciples got into a discussion with a certain Jewish man about purification rites. We don't know who this Jewish man was, what was said about purification or how it connected to Jesus,

but it was apparently in response to this conversation that these disciples came to John complaining about Jesus:

*“Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.”*

These disciples are so bitter and jealous that they do not even say the name of Jesus. They simply refer to Him as “he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness.” The last part, “*to whom you bore witness,*” might have even been a rebuke of John, as if to say, “Rabbi, you drew attention to this man and now we’re losing all of our crowds.” Their claim that “all are going to him” is a gross over-statement and reflects their panic, arising from their “life is a crisis” mindset.

When we panic, we are not seeing with eyes of faith and we are not thinking clearly with biblical wisdom about our situation. God is never caught by surprise by changes in our lives. He ordains them, either directly bringing them to us or allowing them to pass to us through His loving hands. He doesn’t fall asleep at the wheel and then wake up, wondering what’s going on in His world or in our lives. He never lacks wisdom, love or power, and so we can trust His providential ordering of all things. He always knows what we need. He always loves us perfectly and ordains the best for us. He is never frustrated or unable to bring about what He desires for us.

### **C. A Wise, Loving and Humble Response:**

John the Baptist’s disciples may be panicked and bitter, but he is not. He is wise, loving, joyful and humble.

I. **Wise:** *“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.”* (v. 27)

John’s initial response to his disciples is a general proverb or aphorism: *“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.”* This proverb reflects the view that life is a gift. Everything we have is given to us by God. John the Baptist could easily have quoted Job here: *“The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”*

We can’t just go out and grab life by the horns and make things happen for ourselves, for “a person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.” The American ideal of the self-made man is a delusion. The world has never known and will never know a self-made man. The sooner we truly believe that everything we have has been given to us by God, the looser our grip on the things of this life will be and the more grateful our hearts will be.

Some people will claim that this view of life encourages irresponsibility, but that was clearly not the case for John. John didn’t think that because his ministry had been given to him by God he didn’t have to be responsible to do it well. It was quite the opposite: The fact that everything in

his life was a gift from God not only made John humbler and more grateful, less greedy and bitter, but it also made him more responsible. Since he knew God had given him this ministry as a gift, he was not going to abandon his post. He stayed in the wilderness, preaching and baptizing, until God removed him.

John then reminds his disciples of what he had told them about himself: “*You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’*” John never had an inflated view of his own significance. He never imagined for himself a higher role or a more important place in God’s kingdom. His disciples may have thought that John’s great popularity meant that he must be the Messiah, the Christ. He brought them back to reality by reminding them what he had already taught them. John was content to remain in the position God has assigned and his disciples needed to be, too.

## 2. **Loving:** “*The friend of the bridegroom . . . rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice.*” -v. 29

Another accusation that is often brought against the kind of strong view of God’s providence that John expresses here is that it is just a kind of fatalism. But John’s wise understanding of providence is not a cold fatalism. It is warm with love for the Lord and for His good will in John’s life. The key difference between fatalism and strong providence is the warmth of God’s love. God is not like the blind fates spinning out everyone’s life thread without sight or heart or personal involvement. God’s providence is His personal and loving care for His own children, and it draws a warm loving response from the hearts of His children who understand this.

He explains his position to his disciples using the analogy of a wedding. John sees himself as the friend of the bridegroom, what we might call the best man. In a Galilean wedding, such as the wedding at Cana, the groom and his family arrange the wedding and prepare the wedding feast. In Judea, where John grew up, the friend of the bridegroom – the best man – was the one who arranged the wedding. There had been a long-standing tradition in the Ancient Near East that the best man was absolutely forbidden from marrying the bride, no matter what. His job was clear: He was to serve the bridegroom and his bride by arranging their union. His joy was in their union, their wedding.

John was sent by God the Father to prepare for the coming of Jesus, to arrange for the union of Jesus the Messiah with His people, Israel. This shows that John saw his position in warm, affectionate and joyful terms. The fact that large crowds of people were now flocking out to the Judean wilderness to see and hear Jesus doesn’t make John upset. On the contrary, the popularity of Jesus is the completion of John’s joy. It seems that the bride is welcoming her bridegroom, and this is what John has been laboring for; it is why God sent him into the wilderness in the first place.

## 3. **Humble:** “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*” (vv. 29-30)

John's final statement in this section is the most famous and poignant, a fitting and humble conclusion to his teaching of his disciples: He must increase, but I must decrease. The way this is expressed in the Greek indicates a divine necessity. John is not just saying that it is fitting and proper that Jesus would increase in popularity while John decreases in popularity. He is actually saying that God has ordained it and thus it must be so that Jesus will now increase and John will decrease.

We foolish and arrogant humans spend much time fighting God's providence and kicking against what He has ordained. John knows better. He knows that what God has decreed must come to pass, and so he chooses to be thankful for the part God has allowed him to play in the coming of Christ, but he is now content to fade from view and allow Jesus to take center stage.

This concise statement from John has such rich implications for us as believers: "He must increase, but I must decrease." How can I grow as a Christian in love for God and faithfulness to His word? Jesus must increase, and I must decrease. He must be the Lord and the center of my life, and I must take my rightful place at His feet in worship. My will must be submitted to His will. My affections must be conformed to His affections. My priorities must be changed into His priorities. My values must become His values. My thoughts about what is true and right must be re-programmed and replaced by what Jesus thinks is true and right. In every area of my life, He must increase, and I must decrease.

How can this happen? Well, we, too, can rest contented in the fact that this is what God has decreed. If we believe in Jesus, then God is in the process of shaping us to be more like Him. God is correcting our thinking, shaping our affections, molding our will so that Jesus will be more and we will be less. But we are not passive in this process. This is not something God does to us as we passively "Let go and let God." Growing to be more like Christ is something God first does in us and that we do in His power and strength in our lives as He changes us.

Paul sketches the outlines of this process for us in Philippians. In Philippians 1:6, Paul writes, "*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*" Then, in chapter 2, verses 12-13, he writes, "*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*" God has begun the work and He will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. We can be sure of it. He works in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. But we work out our own salvation, working out in our lives what God has worked in us by His Spirit.

Parents need to hear these words at another level, too. As our children grow from childhood to adulthood, we are passing them from our shepherding to Jesus' shepherding. In this process, He must increase, and we must decrease. Jesus must become more important to our children, and they must learn to hear His voice in His word and in worship. They must learn to go to

Him in prayer and seek Him.

### **Conclusion: Do We Have the Eyes of John the Baptist?**

It would only be natural for John the Baptist to feel sorry for himself. His ministry was not to draw people to himself but to point people to Jesus. He was called to gather a following just to pass them off to someone else. Even more, God called him to keep preaching and keep calling people to repent, even as he watched Jesus draw bigger crowds and a larger following. It would only be natural for him to wallow in self-pity, to complain, to demand something better from God. But John's ministry was so much more than "only natural" because he was anointed with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and was empowered to see the world from a God-centered perspective with eyes of faith.

Do we have the eyes of John the Baptist? How many times do we excuse our own behavior because "It's only natural"? We need to start seeing that phrase not as an excuse but as an indictment. Are you feeling sorry for yourself because you aren't getting your way? It's only natural, but you're called to live in a way that's more than natural, that's supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit.

How can we live supernaturally-empowered, Spirit-filled, Spirit-led lives? God has given us very simple, practical and yet powerful ways to do so:

- We need to be in His word daily, reading and studying and praying and memorizing Scripture, to shape our thoughts to be aligned with His truth.
- We need to be in prayer, to pray throughout the day, taking our concerns, our decisions, our pressures and temptations, our doubts and fears before His throne of grace, living our lives in communion with Him.
- We need to come together every Lord's Day morning and worship Him, hearing from His word, praying together and praising His name together.
- We need to share in the Lord's Supper regularly, feeding our souls on Christ by faith.

We sometimes call these things – reading the word of God and hearing it preached, praying alone and corporately, sharing in the Lord's Supper – the ordinary means of grace. In truth, there's nothing ordinary about them. It is how God teaches us, corrects us, strengthens us, provides for us, and trains us in righteousness.

Of course, the real challenge isn't knowing that we should be doing these things. It's not even "finding the time" to do these things, because we all know we make time for the things which are most important to us. The real challenge is having a deep desire and passion, a hunger and a longing for God in our lives, and seeing these means of grace as our access to fellowship with God and growth in God. We need a compelling vision of what it looks like to walk in fellowship with God day-by-day, and this needs to move us to seek the Lord in His word, in prayer, in

worship. Perhaps John the Baptist can provide us with such a vision, as we see his wisdom, his peace of mind, his evident love for the Lord, his joy and his humility. May the Lord be pleased to grant us the vision of John the Baptist in our lives today.