

“Whoever Believes”

The Twelfth in a series of sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 3:22-36; Malachi 2:17-3:6

It is a remarkable thing when someone willingly places the purposes of God above self-interest. Such an act is truly noteworthy and is one of the supreme examples of Christian maturity and sanctification. When John the Baptist tells his over-zealous followers that Jesus must increase, while John must decrease, John is telling us that a new age in redemptive history has arrived because the Messiah has come. We see also one reason why Jesus can speak of John the Baptist as the greatest of Old Testament saints. That Jesus has indeed come just as John the Baptist had expected and revealed that he will give the new birth, enable us to see the kingdom of God, understand heavenly things, believe on him, and then receive eternal life, becomes the great climax of John chapter 3, when John concludes that *“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.”*

As we continue our series on John’s Gospel, we have made our way as far as John 3:21, and John’s account of Jesus’ discourse with Nicodemus, a well-known and learned Jewish Rabbi. We now take up the final section of John 3, verses 22-36, in which John returns to the closing days of the ministry of John the Baptist before offering some observations about the ministry of Jesus thus far. This is the fourth consecutive section in John’s Gospel which makes the point of detailing how Jesus’ messianic mission fulfills significant Old Testament prophecies. No doubt, John does this to illustrate to his readers that with the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry, the old order of things is now passing away. The old covenant era must give way to the new.

There are four ways in which this shift from old to new is apparent. First, in John 2:1-11, John recounts how Jesus miraculously turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana (the first of his miraculous signs) demonstrating that the messianic age was now at hand. The messianic age had been characterized by a number of Israel’s prophets as an age of salvation which would dawn with feasting and celebration (rich foods and fine wine). When Jesus turns 150 gallons of water into wine the messianic symbolism should have been obvious to John’s reader—the messianic age has dawned because Jesus has come.

Second, in John 2:12-25, we read that Jesus went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and there he performed his second miraculous sign—cleansing the temple. When Jesus saw that the outer court of the temple (the court of the Gentiles) was filled with merchants and money changers, Jesus drove them out in righteous anger, even daring to call the Jerusalem temple his father’s house. In doing so, Jesus demonstrated that he is the true temple, superceding the Jerusalem temple which had become a stumbling block to Israel. The grandeur of the temple building had become a source of national pride, obscuring the temple’s role as that place where God was present with his chosen people, and where the repeated sacrifices and Israel’s priesthood pointed ahead to the coming Messiah.

Third, in the first 21 verses of John 3, John reports Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus while in Jerusalem. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of the necessity of being born again (or from above), using the language of those messianic prophecies (especially Ezekiel 36-37) which foretold of the messianic age as one in which God’s Spirit would wash away sin (water) and change human hearts from hearts of stone into hearts of flesh (spirit). In fact, Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless he is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God, nor can he understand heavenly things, no matter how learned he may be. Jesus goes

on to tell Nicodemus that he (Jesus) must be lifted up and that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. This is a reference to the account in Numbers 21 of Moses lifting up a bronze serpent on a pole to spare the disobedient people of Israel from a plague of poisonous snakes. All those who look to the Savior in faith (as lifted up) will be forgiven of their sins.

In John 3:16-21, John summarizes Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus by stating, "*for God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" Because God is love, Jesus did not come to judge the world, because the world has already been under judgment and condemnation from the time of Adam's fall into sin. The point of Jesus' coming to earth as God in human flesh is that all those who look to Jesus will not come under condemnation. In fact, whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life.

In the next section of John (3:22-36), John will make the point that Jesus' ministry now completely supercedes that of John the Baptist, yet another indication (the fourth in this sequence) that the coming of Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy, and that in the person of Jesus (the word made flesh), the kingdom of God has come.¹ John the Baptist must decrease because that one of whom he is herald (or forerunner) has now finally come. Once the Messiah has come, the forerunner's job is over.

With this in mind, we turn our text, verses 22-36 (the end of the chapter). In verse 22, John indicates a change in time and location from the previous dialogue with Nicodemus, which took place in Jerusalem. "*After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.*" John does not tell us how much time elapsed before Jesus left Jerusalem and went out into the Judean countryside. If you look at a map of Palestine during the time of Jesus, Jesus and his disciples were traveling due north from Jerusalem and leaving the more densely populated portion of Judea and moving into a sparsely populated area as they headed back toward the Sea of Galilee (and his home base). As we will see when we get to John 4 (the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman), Samaria is about midway between Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee, directly on the route that Jesus and his disciples were taking back to Galilee.²

It was here that Jesus encounters John the Baptist yet again. Although John implies that Jesus himself was baptizing disciples, the disciple goes to tell us in the next chapter (John 4:2) that Jesus himself did not actually baptize, but that his disciples did. The theme of this fourth consecutive section of John's Gospel demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic expectation is that as Jesus' public ministry was beginning, so too John the Baptist's role as last of the Old Testament prophets was also coming to an end.

As we read in verses 23-24, "*John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison).*" We do not know where Aenon near Salim was located, but the two most likely possibilities lie within the region of Samaria, which was located within the Roman province of Judea. Aenon is a semitic word which means "springs," so there was enough water here for John to baptize. In case you were wondering, likely the baptism of John was performed as the baptized walked into shallow water, knelt down, and then John poured water over them. Full immersion is unlikely given the geography.

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 208-209.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 208-209.

Since Jesus had encountered John the Baptist earlier, “out in the sticks” east of the Jordan, John the Disciple’s subsequent report means that by this time, John the Baptist had moved back across the Jordan River into an area north of Jerusalem in the region of Samaria. This was not as remote an area as John was in previously, but it was still was a rural area. Although Jesus’ public ministry had begun, Jesus has not yet attracted the number of followers (dare I say the publicity) that John had, and many people were still coming to John the Baptist to receive his baptism of repentance—and given the geography, making a significant effort to do so. The synoptic gospels, on the other hand, report that Jesus did not begin his public ministry until after John the Baptist already had been arrested. But in his Gospel, John, an eyewitness to these events, is speaking of a period of time early in Jesus’ ministry when our Lord had gone to Cana, then to Jerusalem, and then as he was heading back to Galilee where his messianic mission would become more widely-known, Jesus encountered John the Baptist once again. This is not a contradiction between John’s Gospel and the synoptics, but is merely additional information about Jesus’ early ministry given us by John which is not mentioned in the synoptic gospels.

According to John (the author of the Gospel) it was during this time that an argument broke out between the followers of John the Baptist and an unnamed Jewish observer over the nature of Jewish purification rites. According to verse 25, “*now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.*” If John’s baptism of repentance superceded Jewish purification rites (i.e., the ceremonial washings, etc.), then what place remained for the traditional Jewish practices? Apparently, one individual thought Jewish tradition worth contending for and was arguing about this with John’s followers. How did a once for all baptism like John’s fit with the daily washing practiced by the Jews of John’s day? We are not told of the outcome of this debate, only that it fostered several additional questions raised by John the Baptist’s disciples discussed in the following verses.

As we read in verse 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.’*” In light of the debate about the validity of John’s baptism, especially in relationship to Jewish purification rites, some of John’s most loyal disciples now had questions about John the Baptist’s relationship to Jesus. John’s disciples had become aware that Jesus was in the general same area, and that he too was baptizing disciples (well, actually, it was Jesus’ disciples who were doing the baptizing). So, if Jesus’ new ministry is valid, what about John’s? What would happen to John *if* Jesus became more popular than John and people stopped coming to John for baptism?

So John’s followers who had been arguing with a Jew about purification, now come to the Baptist and ask him, “Rabbi, what about Jesus?” “You said he was coming after you, and now everyone is following him (Jesus).” We might like to think these words are offered to John as words of encouragement now that the messianic age has indeed come because Jesus has begun his ministry. But it is much more likely that John’s disciples are growing concerned that people were leaving John (and them) to follow the new guy. Although John was still attracting large crowds, some of his more zealous followers apparently see Jesus as an unwelcome competitor.

John the Baptist understands why Jesus has come and that his own mission as messianic forerunner must come to an end—because the Messiah has come, John’s role in redemptive history will cease. In verse 27, John tells his loyal followers to consider carefully what the presence of Jesus nearby actually means. In verse 27, “*John answered, ‘A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.’*” John knows that God’s sovereign purpose is that Jesus must begin his public ministry to fulfill all righteousness. John knows that all that he has (in terms of his own ministry), has come from God. That Jesus’ disciples are baptizing in the same place where he is baptizing does not mean that Jesus is an

unwelcome competitor. Rather, that Jesus has come is the sign that God has fulfilled his purposes through the ministry of John the Baptist. The Baptist's more zealous followers need to understand this reality and not overreact to Jesus' ministry out of pettiness or jealousy.

In fact, John reminds his followers of the nature of his mission in verse 28. *"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'"* John knows that the beginning of Jesus' public ministry means that the kingdom of God is at hand. John is not the Christ—Jesus is. John is but the herald of the Christ. The Baptist is that one chosen to fulfill the prophecy of Malachi 3:1-2 (our Old Testament lesson). *"Behold, I send my messenger [John the Baptist], and he will prepare the way before me [Jesus, the Messiah]. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap."*

John is the forerunner who brings the heavenly summons to Israel, warning them that the Messiah is right behind him. When the Messiah comes, he will dispense all the covenant blessings and curses as depicted by Malachi. John knew this role had been assigned to him by YHWH, and that he never claimed or implied otherwise. The Lord has suddenly come to his temple. Although he and his disciples are nearby baptizing, Jesus will indeed bring down God's judgment upon his disobedient people. John sees this not as a bad thing, but as the fulfillment of God's gracious covenant promises. His followers must see this.

In verse 29, John continues to explain how he sees his own role in redemptive history. *"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."* In the world of first century Judaism, the best friend of the bridegroom (i.e., the "best man") was responsible to organize the wedding the celebration and, in fact, he presided over most of it. This was a huge responsibility. Yet, despite all of the efforts he was required to make, the bride belonged to the bridegroom—not to the best man. If the wedding went well, the best friend should take great satisfaction knowing that he did his duty to his best friend and to his family. This is exactly the image John uses to describe his own role. He presides over the dawn of the messianic age, and now that the Messiah has come, John can take satisfaction in knowing that he has done the right thing. But this also means the time has come for him to fade away.

As with pretty much everything in this section of John, there is significant Old Testament background underlying the Baptist's comments. There are several Old Testament passages which describe the faithful in Israel as the bride of YHWH. In Isaiah 62:4-5, we read, *"you shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."* A similar statement is found in Jeremiah 2:2. *"Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord, 'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.'" John may be alluding to the fact that his work is complete because he has introduced the faithful in Israel to their Messiah, in anticipation of the great wedding feast yet to come.³*

Therefore, in verse 30, John can say *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* John knew that it was the

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 210.

will of God that his ministry—having fulfilled its purpose—must now come to an end. The Baptist is not jealous or bitter that people are leaving him to follow Jesus. Recall, the Baptist already sent Andrew and John (the Disciple) to follow Jesus. We see in John’s action a wonderful demonstration of joyful submission to the will of God. It is no wonder that Jesus will later say of John and those following him, “*what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*” (Matthew 11:7-11).

Having completed his discussion of John the Baptist’s comments about Jesus, the “other” John (the author of the Gospel) offers a number of explanatory comments (as he did in verses 16-21 after Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus) which summarize the events of this chapter. In verse 31, John states of Jesus “*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.*” There is an important theological reason as to why Jesus is greater than John. Jesus is the incarnate word, who took to himself a true human nature. He has, therefore, come from above. He is the eternal word who has created all things, and who holds them together. The word John uses for from above is *anōthen*, the same word Jesus used when speaking to Nicodemus—you must be born “from above.” John the Baptist is of the earth—he is human. But Jesus is from above, and comes from heaven. The eternal word became flesh and dwelt among us. And although he is fully human, he is above all, because he remains the eternal logos and is God in human flesh.

One of the reasons why Jesus took to himself a true human nature is spelled out in verse 32. “*He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.*” As the eternal word coming down from above, Jesus is uniquely suited to bear witness (a legal term, again) about what he has seen and heard while in the presence of the Father. Just as Israel’s prophets must be heard by the people of Israel because they bring the word which God gave them, so too, whatever Jesus says is authoritative because he has been in the presence of the Father and the Holy Spirit throughout eternity. Jesus became incarnate to tell us (in a legally binding way) about the human condition (darkness) and brings to us the light (grace and truth) which has come into the world. But as John reminds us, people do not receive his testimony. Why? Because people love the darkness of their sinful human condition, rather than the light which exposes sin for what it is, sin. But it is rather remarkable when we think about it, that when Jesus came to earth, he was rejected by Israel—as the dialogue with Nicodemus so tragically indicates.

Yet, there are those who do believe, who have been born from above, who have been given eternal life (life that is from above). In verse 33, John states, “*whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.*” To accept (i.e., receive) the testimony of Jesus is to confirm (trust, accept, believe) that what Jesus says about God is true. And this brings us to the heart of what it means to “believe” in Jesus. To have faith in the biblical sense of the term (i.e., “to trust”) is to believe that Jesus is who he says he is (God in human flesh—as for example in John 8:58 when Jesus says that it is he, the I AM, who was speaking to Moses from the burning bush). To believe means to accept the fact that Jesus is the creator of all things, and that nothing came into existence apart from him.

To receive Jesus’s testimony is to accept Jesus’ teaching about human nature—that it is sinful. It is to accept Jesus’ verdict about the world—that it is already under condemnation awaiting the final day of judgment. To believe is to accept the fact that unless we are born from above, we cannot see the kingdom of God, nor understand heavenly things unless God enables us to do so. To accept Jesus’

testimony is to believe that because God loves the world (which lay under judgment) he sent Jesus to save those who believe (trust) in him. It is to accept that Jesus must be lifted up and that we must look to him if we are to be saved from the guilt and power of sin. It is to accept God's testimony that there is no other way to be saved from God's wrath than by the death of Jesus.

This point is reinforced in verse 34. *“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.”* God speaks to his people through his word, given through his prophets who are commissioned to speak the words of God to the people of God. Paul speaks of these words as “God-breathed” in 2 Timothy 3:16. It is the Holy Spirit who ensures that the prophets (and then later the Apostles) speak the words of God as given by God and which are written down as Scripture. But Jesus is the consummate (or final prophet). God gives to him the Holy Spirit without measure. Jesus has been sent by God to speak the words of God, and in doing so gives legally binding testimony about those heavenly things which the Spirit must enable us to understand. He speaks the truth.

Verse 35 gives us confirmation of this very point. *“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.”* It is the Father who sends the son into the world (as we saw in John 3:16-17), and it is the Father who gives to the Son the Holy Spirit so that Jesus is enabled to fulfill his messianic mission as God's final prophet, priest, and king. Once again, we see John emphasize the point that God sends the Son and gives him the Holy Spirit, because God is love. Not only does God love the world, he loves the Son and gives the Holy Spirit to the Son so that Jesus will fulfill his messianic mission which culminates in his being lifted-up on the cross for sinners. Therefore, it is important to realize that the basis for God's plan of redemption is his love for lost and fallen sinners, and that as redemptive history unfolds (in all its rich, wonderful, and dramatic events) what is driving God's saving purpose is his love for all that he has created. Because God is love, he chooses to satisfy his holy justice through the obedience, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is why there is a cross and an empty tomb. God is both loving and just.

John's account of these events early in Jesus' ministry comes to a fitting end in verse 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.”* In light of all that Jesus will do for sinners in the balance of his messianic mission, there are only two choices for those who read and hear the words of John. The first choice is to remain in darkness because you love your sin. To remain in darkness is to disobey Jesus' call to believe in him so as to receive eternal life. It is to reject God's legal testimony and his summons to believe in Jesus. All those who make this choice (the worst of all possible choices) must realize that you remain under God's judgment. The wrath of God—his holy anger remains on you (directed toward you) and will be finally, fully, and eternally meted out on the day of judgment.

The other choice is to believe in the Son and receive eternal life. The invitation John extends is universal—whenever believes in Jesus Christ receives eternal life. Should you accept this invitation, it is because you are born from above, and have been given understanding into heavenly things. When you trust in Jesus Christ (specifically that his death on the cross is for you and in your place), you will receive eternal life, and you will begin to realize its blessings even now in this present age.

Beloved: John's wonderful invitation and stern warning still stands. *“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.”*