

### John 3:22-4:3

\_\_\_\_\_ We are continuing this week with our study of the Gospel of John, picking up with verse 22 of chapter 3, and working through to the end of that chapter. If you have been with us for this series then you will know that our working premise has been that this Gospel was written by the Apostle John, around the year 80 AD and was aimed, specifically, at the many scattered Jews across the then known world, including and especially those Jews who were living in and around the city of Ephesus - the city in which John seems to have been living at the time of this letter.

In pursuit of his overall goal of promoting faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of God, John has concentrated his energies in these opening chapters on helping his readers to get a clear picture of Jesus identity and, alongside that, a clear sense of what it means to respond appropriately TO Jesus, once you've grasped who he actually is.

In our study last week we saw how responding appropriately to Jesus, in the first instance, is a consequence of the mysterious workings of God's Spirit that, like the wind, blows where and when it will, causing people to be "born again" or "born from above" - i.e., *spiritually* born. We further saw that this privilege was not reserved only for those of a certain descent or lineage but in fact extended to people all over the world. Still further we saw how the fruit of God's mysterious working is made manifest, is made *evident*, in the manner in which people respond to God's Son. As a result, those who believe in him are not condemned. Those who do not believe in him, bring judgment upon themselves by virtue of that rejection, and so demonstrate that God's Spirit is not working within them.

This morning, as we continue working through chapter 3, we will be looking once again at this theme of Jesus' identity, especially as compared with the person and work of John the Baptist - a theme which John has already explored once before in this Gospel and which he expands upon a little bit more here.

As we saw previously, at the time this Gospel was being written there was apparently some question as to the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. After all, John *had* preceded Jesus and, in fact, had baptized Jesus. On top of that, even though Jesus had come on the scene, John's ministry was continuing. What were people to make of that? Were these two men engaging in separate ministries? Was one superior to the other? What should people think about these things?

The verses before us this morning provide some answers to those sorts of questions, and in the process continue to clarify who Jesus is and what sort of response that identity calls for. Before we look any further at these things, let's pray together.....

*Father in heaven please attend now to your people gathered so that the things we see and hear from your Word, and about your Son, will bring real nourishment to the hearts of your people. Please give us understanding, Father - understanding that is evidenced in changed lives and new desires and different decisions. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.*

(Read 3:22 - 4:3)

At the beginning of this passage, we see John setting the scene very well for the discussion that will follow. In the first two verses we see Jesus, off with his disciples, baptizing people in the Judean countryside, and we see John the Baptist doing the same, with his disciples in a place called Aenon, near Salim. Two spiritual leaders, in two different places, performing simultaneous baptisms.

After setting up that situation for us, verse 25 tells us that a “discussion” arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over the matter of purification. Now, we don’t actually know what the nature of this discussion was - or precisely how it related to baptism. However, what we DO know is that as a *result* of this discussion - those engaged in it felt the need to come to John and talk to him about some things that were on their mind - specifically, the whole matter of Jesus’ on-going ministry and the fact that more and more people were going to him to be baptized. Clearly these people don’t know what to think of all this and, probably more to the point, they aren’t sure what *John* thinks about all of this.

And so John, listening to their comments and seeing their questions and concerns, *tells* them what he thinks. He reminds them, first of all, of the simple fact that the things we have are that which has been given to us by God, and we need to remember that, especially that last bit. In other words, John wasn’t sitting there thinking that he deserved something different or something better from God. Instead, his statement here shows that John has learned some things about *contentment* - the contentment that comes from a deep appreciation and belief in the goodness and wisdom of God.

What John knew was that to do otherwise - to not be content but, instead, to complain about one’s role or place within God’s designs is, in fact, to complain against God himself and to question His wisdom in setting things out in the particular way that He has. John’s words show that he is not at all thinking in this way but quite the opposite - He believes in the wisdom and goodness of God. He was happy with the place that God had given him.

Well, following that very quick, but substantial, reminder, John adds another one. He draws his disciples’ attention to some things that they are all well aware of. He reminds them of things he has said among them - namely, his frank and clear declarations about who he is, and about who Jesus is. His disciples have seen and heard, certainly on more than one occasion, how John’s entire ministry has been devoted to turning attention *away* from himself and putting it onto Jesus. Surely they could not have missed this emphasis.

And then, in case they might still be wondering about how John *feels* about all these things, he adds a few comments about bridegrooms and their friends. In John’s illustration, Jesus is the bridegroom and he is the bridegroom’s *friend* - or what we would call today “the best man”. John’s attitude toward Jesus throughout this whole thing has been like a best man’s attitude toward the groom. He is happy and excited for the groom. He *knows* that the groom is the one in the spotlight - not him - and he is glad that this is so. If the groom is happy, then he is happy - his joy is complete. This is how John *feels* about what has been going on.

Following this we get the well-known verse 30 which is basically a summary of John's whole perspective on everything he has been saying: *Jesus must increase and he (John) must decrease*. In other words, not only does John see that his ministry is *secondary*, in relation to Jesus' ministry, he also sees that his ministry is *fading away*, it is diminishing. Which is really quite astounding. It is one thing to recognize the pre-eminence of another's ministry. It is quite another to admit that this pre-eminence means that one's own ministry needs to fade away into the background. And yet John seems to have been only too willing to see this happen.

Why would John be so willing for this to happen? Well, what follows in verses 31-35 are some very succinct, yet powerful reasons why John would have been so willing and why he was so prepared to see Jesus' ministry continue to grow in importance while his own ministry dwindled away.

Firstly, by way of an analogy, verse 31 affirms that John saw his ministry as "earthly" - as limited, as finite - as compared with the ministry of Jesus which was heavenly in nature and in origin. Now, in saying these things John is not belittling his own ministry. He is not saying that the role God has given him has been meaningless or worthless. Far from it. John knows that he has played an important part. And what he has said and done are good - as far as they go. But John is under no illusions about himself or about the part he has played. And he knows that what Jesus brings is far superior to anything he might say or do on God's behalf. John might *point* people to heavenly realities, but Jesus speaks about these things with an authority that John will never have. Jesus speaks about these things from the vantage point of a *resident*, an *insider* - as we saw last week.

Indeed, and this is really a second point in his argument, *Jesus speaks the very words of God*, as vs 34 makes clear. To be sure, as a prophet of God, John also functioned as the mouthpiece of God. He too spoke on God's behalf just as every other prophet had done.

However, the difference between John and Jesus was that while John had been given the Spirit in proportions sufficient to accomplish the task God had given him - Jesus, by contrast had been given the Spirit of God *without measure* - i.e., *infinitely*. This is a crucial difference and sets Jesus apart from all others who also are said to possess the Spirit of God. All of God's prophets possessed the Spirit *in some measure*, but only Jesus has the Spirit without measure - with all the fullness of God the Father, in other words. Jesus speaks not only FOR God, but AS God.

And then, adding to reasons already given, verse 35 affirms the fact of God's deep love for His Son and the Father's *generosity* toward His Son - giving him all things, putting all things into his hand, giving him authority over heaven and earth. For all these reasons and more, John willingly and gladly supports the expansion of Jesus' ministry, even as he watches the fading away of his own.

Finally, in verse 36, John, being the evangelist that he is, cannot talk so passionately about the identity of Jesus without once again calling his readers to respond to this revelation. “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, several things could be said about this verse, but in the interest of time, the *one* comment that I will make concerns the way that John uses *belief* and *obedience* almost interchangeably. He says that those who believe have eternal life, and then by contrast he says that those who *do not obey* remain under judgment - which is surprising because what you would have expected him to say there was that “those who do *not* believe the Son shall *not* see life”.

Now, unless you have an ESV translation, you may not see straight away what I am getting at because other translations, like the NIV, have rendered the Greek word in the second part of verse 36 as “believe”. Now while that is certainly a *possible* translation, the ESV translators have recognized, rightly in my view, that a better translation is “obey”, especially because John uses an entirely different word in the last half of the verse than the one he used for “believe” in the first part of the verse.

At any rate, the point is that in setting “believing” over against “obeying” John shows his understanding of the close, and even inseparable connection between belief and obedience. God’s revelation, God’s truth calls for commitment. It calls for a response. To put it another way, there is a covenantal aspect to God’s revelation such that one can genuinely say that a “truth” that has not yet been obeyed or appropriated in some way is a truth that has not yet been *truly* believed.

You will see this same idea manifested in different ways in the NT - but with a similar message. Sometimes the connection is between *believing* and obeying. At other times it is between *loving* God and obeying him and at still other times it is between *knowing* God and obeying him. Whatever the case, the NT does not seem to know of any sort of belief in or knowledge of or love for God that is not visibly demonstrated in the lifestyle of the one who is doing all the believing and knowing and loving. When God’s people obey him, they are showing that they believe him, and know him and love him. When God’s people do not obey him, they show that they do not believe him, that they do not love him, that they do not know him.

This is important because it helps to fill out our growing understanding of what it means to respond appropriately to the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. We have already seen earlier in this chapter the importance of believing in the Son. Here we see that there is more to this “believing” than mere mental assent. The believing in view here is more than just agreeing to the truthfulness of certain propositions but includes a willingness to humble oneself and submit oneself to the implications that accompany such a belief.

With that as a sort of quick “walk through” the passage, let’s spend a couple minutes thinking a little bit further about just a few of the many things that we might benefit from in these verses.....

Firstly, and most importantly - if you have never responded to the revelation of God in Jesus, then that is what you need to do. You need to believe in the Son of God. Now, what does that mean? It means that you receive and accept and embrace him for who he is - the Crucified Savior and Resurrected Lord. Accepting him as the crucified Savior means that you embrace the point and purpose of his crucifixion - which was to save sinners like yourself from the consequences of their sin and rebellion against God. Accepting him as the Risen Lord means that you embrace the reality of that - i.e., you acknowledge his rightful rule and authority over your life and submit yourself to him - body and soul, to live your life on *his* terms, not your own.

That's the sort of believing that is called for. Now a lot more could be said about all of that and if you would like to talk with someone about it further, please see me after the service this morning, or, if you came with a friend, talk to them afterwards and we'll try and answer any questions you might have about all of that.

The next thing I would say is that if you *have* already responded to the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, then there are two other things I want you to see here. The first one is this: **Notice the complete absence of competitiveness or jealousy or envy in John the Baptist.** When John's disciples point out to him the fact that more and more people are going over to Jesus - you can see in this sort of observation the potential for a tremendous rivalry breaking out between the disciples of Jesus and the disciples of John. It may well have been the case that John's disciples *were* rather put out by what was happening with Jesus, perhaps being envious of what was going on there.

Nevertheless, what might have become a real problem ended up being no problem at all because of the attitude and perspective of both Jesus and John. They both wanted God's glory first - and that took away any potential problems that might exist. That defused any budding seeds of jealousy and rivalry that might have been there. Focusing on John for the moment - we see in him the evidence of true humility, true contentedness with his role and even a genuine joy and happiness at the great things that are happening in Jesus' ministry. And all of this in the face of his own impending end.

Certainly we can learn from John the Baptist here. Like him, we ought to be able to recognize a genuine work of God going on around us. And when we see these things, then we ought to be the first ones to stand up and cheer. When we see good things happening in other churches and other ministries then we ought to be glad, we ought to be praying for those good things to *keep* happening.

To be sure, not everything that goes on in the name of God IS of God. And so we have to be discerning. That being said, however, when we do see God working in and through these legitimate ministries we ought not become envious, or critical, or jealous of these things but, instead, should rejoice that God's Kingdom is advancing in other places - *regardless of what it is doing in this place.*

Which leads to the second thing I wanted to draw out for us this morning, and it's this: **Notice the self-deferential nature of John's life.** Notice his whole life orientation - "He must increase, I must decrease". Now there's a personal mission statement if ever there was one. Here is a man who, when he got out of bed in the morning, knew what he was doing, where he was going, and why he was going there.

But here's the thing. That's not just John's mission statement. It is the mission statement of every person. Isn't that what Paul says in his letter to the Colossians,

*Colossians 3:16-17 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

"He must increase, I must decrease." That is your purpose. Your purpose is not to live the American Dream. It is not to make a name for yourself. It is not to build your own little kingdom. It is not to build more and more barns to hoard more and more grain. That is not your purpose. Your purpose, at the end of the day, is the same as John's. Yes, the details are different. Yes, your gifts are different. Yes, your role in God's on-going redemptive purposes is a different role. But the goal is the same, the purpose is the same, the intent is the same, the perspective is the same, the mind-set is the same. "He must increase, I must decrease."

Imagine what it would be like to live your life as if God really was the main attraction. Imagine living your life with the sort of contentment that would be required to play the role you have been given. Imagine living a life where promoting God's agenda was the foremost thought in your mind as you rolled out of bed in the morning. That is a hard thing to do in this world. Because what this world and this culture is desperately trying to convince you of is that everything is about you. *It's all about you* - your success, your happiness, your entertainment, your choice, your freedom. You, you, you, you, you.

And in a world that is pushing *that* message, learning to believe that it is NOT all about you is a challenge. Learning to die to yourself is hard. Living in a way where your commitment to God's kingdom means that you, personally, might miss out on some things - maybe even a lot of things - that's a hard one in this culture. It is very difficult to stand on the dock while everyone you know gets on the boat. It can be a very lonely feeling sometimes. Very isolating.

But if the boat is not going where God is taking this whole thing, then you don't need to be on it.

You have ONE LIFE to invest for the glory of God.

ONE LIFE.