

Greater Groom

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[0 : 00] Well, as you heard, we're on John 3, at the last part of that chapter. We're continuing this sermon series on the Gospel of John. And in this chapter, we are seeing the last words of John the Baptist in this Gospel.

This is the last time we're going to see him in John. And John is a compelling figure. He is a great, great person, worth taking a look at.

And the most wonderful thing about him is that you can't talk about him at all without talking about Jesus, without seeing Jesus raised up and glorified and exalted.

And John was a special person. He was well known. In our culture today, superstars are around. We see them. And in fact, they take a big, big place in our society. You can't watch media without seeing superstars every day. And usually they're in some form of entertainment.

[1 : 05] They are singers. They are in bands. They are actors. They are sports figures as well. Sometimes, not that often, superstars are politicians.

And once in a while, they are royalty. In fact, if you Google Prince George images, you will not see a northern BC town that is currently hosting the Canada Games.

You will see thousands of pictures of a very cute toddler. Thousands and thousands of them. And you see, superstars take very different forms.

They may look differently in our society. But the thing that they all have in common is they have a major following. Some work really hard for that following.

And other people, like George, are just born. And it happens. But John the Baptist was a superstar in Israel as well.

[2 : 08] But he was unlike any that we have today. He wasn't wealthy at all. He wasn't particularly photogenic, we don't think, from the description. He wasn't an entertainer or an athlete, probably.

But the one thing he had in common with the superstars that we have today is that he was very well known. He had a following. In fact, Matthew tells us that Jerusalem and all of Judea, the province around, as well as the Jordan region where he was ministering near this river, they were all going to hear him preach about repentance, about the need to get ready for a big thing that God was going to do.

And they were baptized by him. And there were a number of people who were his disciples, actually. They followed him. And even though he was way out in the wilderness doing his work, he was really, really well known.

If there were Twitter accounts back then, he would have more by far than anyone in that part of the world. But if you look at verse 26, you can turn to 888, very easy page to remember.

But if you all turn to chapter 3, verse 26, you will see a crisis in John's life. And the crisis comes because his closest followers were upset with Jesus, of all people.

[3 : 38] And he comes to John, or they come to John, quite upset. And they say, the one who was with you across the Jordan, the one that you bore witness to, in other words, you gave him a start.

You told everybody, look, there's the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Well, he is baptizing as well. And everyone is going to him.

They're flocking to him. And what this means is that you are not nearly as popular as he is. Your Twitter account's starting to go down. You're not as successful.

You're losing your influence. And that makes us feel a bit insecure. Well, John's answer must have absolutely floored his followers.

Because in the following verses, he says, I am absolutely overjoyed that this is happening. My joy is fulfilled because what you are telling me.

[4 : 40] Well, why is this? There's two reasons. The first has to do with what John knows about himself. And the second reason is because what he knows about Jesus.

It's very simple how this passage lays out. But it has a lot to do with us. It is life-changing. And the things that he knows about himself are several things that he tells us.

He says, anything good, first of all, in my life or anybody's life comes from God. So the way he puts it there in verse 26 is, A person can't receive even one thing unless it is given to him from heaven. You see, he knows that any success that he has in his ministry, anything that's good in life, actually, is something that God has given. You see, John was a great communicator.

He was a very strong leader as well. A marvelous teacher. I mean, he was a charismatic figure. You could not be, you can't leave him and not be changed is the way his effect was.

[5 : 53] But he knew that all of these things were given to him from God for God's good purpose. And according to God's timing, which is not always, in fact, usually not what the world considers good timing or a good purpose.

So in the world's eyes, the disciples' eyes, it looks like Jesus is causing failure for John. But this was actually God's success.

Because it meant that the very thing that John was born for, to prepare people for God's great saving work in the world, to prepare people for Jesus really, was finally taking place.

It was finally happening. And so, and so John loses his influence. He loses his popularity. And things get worse for John.

He would soon end up in prison, where he would die telling the truth about God to a very corrupt king, King Herod. So, if you look at that picture from a world's point of view, it looks like his career went up and then it just took a nosedive.

[7 : 04] But God saw it completely different. He, God saw that nosedive as extraordinary success. Jesus said, this man is the greatest of all the prophets.

That's what God thought of John. And that's because he was the person who announced the arrival of God's saving work in the world, Jesus. It's because he glorified Jesus in everything that he said. And then he died sharing that truth, the truth of Jesus and the implications on life to the most powerful leaders of his time.

And so, when John died, we can know that when he saw God face to face, he heard those words, well done, good and faithful servant.

And those are the words that every Christian, every follower of God, desires to hear above all words, because those are the words of success. That's what true, godly success is all about.

[8 : 09] And you know, we cling to a very worldly idea of failures in our lives. We believe that Christians should be spared failures. That if we are blessed by God, we will not experience failures at all.

But the opposite is true. God is in charge of your failures. He is working in the most powerful way we can imagine in the midst of our failures. And he uses them to bring success.

In fact, the failure themselves in the world's eyes, and maybe even our eyes, are sometimes, maybe even often, a huge success in God's eyes.

And so, and so John is able to say, God is Lord of my success and my failure. And there is this deep peace and contentment in John, even as he is ambitious for God, and working with all of his energy that God gives him.

Even as he does that, he is able to rest and be at peace and be content in who God is. And God calls us here to, like John, trust him to rule our success and our failures as well.

[9 : 22] God has the big picture. We don't. Now, the second thing that he knew about himself is in verse 28. Very simply, he says, I'm not the Christ.

Well, that's sort of a strange thing to say. But it's a telling statement. Because John was so powerful. He was so well respected that there were many who thought, maybe this is the Messiah, the anointed one.

This is the one who has brought God's kingdom to earth. So John had to be clear with his students. I am not he. There was a film that came out about 20 years ago called Rudy.

And I don't know if any of you saw that movie, but it's a very inspirational movie. It's about a boy who wants to get into Notre Dame and play football. He's much too small. He doesn't have the academic background.

But he works very hard and he gets to a point of desperation where he doesn't look like he'll get into Notre Dame. And he's prayed, he says. I've tried everything. And he comes and sees his parish priests.

[10:26] And he said, I've done all these things. I don't know if I'll get in. Can you do something for me? And the parish priest said, son, he said, I've worked for 35 years learning about religion, understanding who God is.

I've come up with two incontrovertible facts that I know to be true. There is a God and I am not he. That is what John is saying.

And that is what we have to say as well all of the time. To say that we are not ruling. We are not God over our situations and our lives. God himself is.

And constantly, we are needing to hear John's words saying, I am not the Christ. I am the one who points to God. I am the one who goes to God and depends upon him for everything in my life.

And in fact, seeing Jesus flourish at his expense makes John overjoyed. He is overjoyed that he is not the Christ and that there is a Christ and he is there in front of him.

[11:37] In fact, in verse 29, he says, I am like a bridegroom's best man. That's the image he uses. Now, I have presided at lots of weddings in my ministry.

And I have seen the whole range of best men and bridesmaids as well. And some of them are really, really helpful. And some, I think, see their mission as being as disruptive as they possibly can.

And they even look up on the internet about how can I be disruptive. And one of the things I often will tell the grooms is I want you to check the bottoms of your shoes. And they will say, why?

And I will say, well, because messages can be written on the bottom of your shoes. And when you come up to the front of the church to kneel, to pray with your wife, the whole congregation is going to be reading what's there. So what are you talking about?

So I'll say, check the bottom of your shoes. So sometimes what happens is I'll look, and sure enough, on one heel, it'll say something like, help, and the other one, it'll say, me. And you learn these little tricks as an officiator of weddings.

[12:45] But when that happens, I tell the best man, you are switching shoes with the groom. And I always hope that the groom's shoes are much smaller because it makes for a very uncomfortable wedding for the best man at that point.

But the role of the best man in the first century Palestine was very different from being the one who disrupts. They were the one who actually facilitated the whole wedding process.

They were a very important figure. They had important duties. And one of the things that they did was actually to ensure, and sometimes they would actually lead the bride to the bridegroom when they're finally meeting for the wedding itself.

And what their job is is to listen to the groom, hear his voice, and to do what the groom says. Their role is to make sure that this union happens without a hitch.

And I know the blessing of a best man like that. My brother, my twin brother, was my best man. And he saw his role very similarly to that. And it is a huge blessing.

[13:59] It is a blessing. And this is what John says I am about. Success for the best man in John's time was that everything was prepared so that the bride and groom could be joined together.

And so John says this is my job. I am the best man arranging to bring together the bride, which in the Old Testament is often a picture for the people of God.

So he says my job is to bring that bride to the bridegroom who is Jesus. And because people are coming to Jesus now, my job is complete.

My identity, what I am all about, my role as the best man is a success. It is happening. And he is overjoyed. There is this sense of gladness.

His greatest joy is to see this happen. And this tells us about our Christian life too, what it means to follow Jesus. Because what is the greatest thing for us?

[15:00] Is it not to bring people to Jesus the bridegroom? to ensure that that happens, that the distractions, the things that would prevent that are taken away.

And in fact, that we can lead people to come to Christ. Because the thing is that we, as the best man, in a sense, cannot give life, we can't give hope, we can't give God's forgiveness or his peace to anyone by ourself.

our job is to bring people to Jesus who alone is the one who saves, who alone can heal, he alone can give life and forgive sin.

And so this is the joyful work that God has given us to do. In that sense, we have a common mission with John. Jesus loves the people in your life to the extent, this is what we heard in John 3:16, that he died for our sins, the sins of the world.

So our joy is to arrange for those people in our lives to meet Jesus in your prayers, in the conversations that you have, in the way that you live your life.

[16:13] This is the joy we have in our life. Now the last thing that John says about himself is one of the greatest things that anyone has ever said. And that is, he must increase and I must decrease.

Jesus must increase. I must decrease. Now I don't know if any of you memorize scripture. That's a very good verse to memorize and it's really easy.

You can memorize it by the end of this service. In fact, if the sermon goes off track, just keep memorizing that verse and you will not go wrong.

It has this huge importance in our life because what John is saying here is that it is God's clear plan. It must happen. It's not just that it's a good idea but it's God's plan that Jesus' rule and his influence will increase as John's influence decreases.

That's going to happen. And the amazing thing about this is that John loves this. He is glad about it. It's not woe is me because Jesus is taking center stage and I'm sort of being pushed off.

[17:26] He is saying, yes, this is what I have lived for. Jesus is becoming greater and greater and it is happening because I give up myself and my ambitions to him and I make him my ambition and I receive him into my life.

My joy is complete. Well, it's a wonderful thing to hear. It is an amazing picture we see in this man's life. And the question is how can that be?

It's not a natural thing to be overjoyed about that but it is real. Well, very simply it's because John knows the unique greatness of Jesus.

And that's what the end, the last section of our passage is about verses 31 through 36. It is about the greatness of Jesus. And I want to just say two things even though there's so much here about it but two general things that he is saying and the first is that Jesus came from heaven and he is above all.

Now this is something, well, I know that, we understand that but what this means is that when Jesus speaks he is bearing witness to what he has seen and what he has heard in heaven.

[18:42] John, that's why the beginning, I don't know if you remember the beginning of John but we heard it said that no one has ever seen God but the only God who is at the Father's side, that's Jesus, he has made him known.

This is the gift of Jesus to us. He shows God to us because he is God. And John says that's a real contrast to me and it's a real contrast to any, somebody who would say that they're a religious expert in the world because John says and anyone else from the world, from the earth, belong to the earth and speaks in an earthly way.

In other words, they are completely limited by what they observe in this world. They cannot know God or the things of God unless Jesus, who is God, makes that known.

So what we're being told here is that in a sense we are in a fog in this world. And this is a very good morning to talk about that. If you came very early this morning to this church, it was completely shrouded in fog.

And I think Terry is one of the earliest ones here and that's what he said. I came from Richmond. It was very foggy when I came at 9 o'clock and I got to 49th Street and it was bright sun like this.

[20:03] John is saying when we think of God and who he is, we are so limited. It is like being in a fog where we cannot see very far in front of us. But when Jesus comes, the full light of God, the brightness, the clarity of him is made known to us.

That's why Jesus is known in John as the light of the world. He says, I am the light of the world. I visited my uncle about a year ago.

My uncle was dying. And shortly before he died, I flew out to Winnipeg and spent three or four days with him. And in his house and his family there, he was able to be at home to die.

He received dozens and dozens of visitors. And there were very interesting conversations we had. And of course, you know, they're facing death. And I'm very thankful my uncle had a sense of humor, especially the way some of the conversations went.

because people would come and they would talk about death and God. And there were lots of people who had no faith in God. And they would say things like, well, all religion is just man-made. [21 : 13] Or you don't know what will happen at death. It's probably just the end. You know, that's it. Well, that's a great comfort. Thanks for sharing. And if John was there, he would say, you are earthly.

You are extremely limited in talking about this. And we need Jesus to tell us the things of heaven. He is the only witness of the heavenly realities.

And he speaks of what is happening above with complete authority. We actually have to listen to somebody who is outside of the world to understand the things of God, what death is about, what true life is about, and who God is.

Jesus is the only one who can do that. Well, secondly, the second part, John says, Jesus, very simply, he says, Jesus is God. Not only does he come above and from above he's witnessed, he is God.

The word became flesh, come to earth. And if you look at verses 34 and 35, they are marvelous because they tell us about the Trinity.

[22 : 21] And I think pretty clearly. Look at those verses. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the spirit without measure.

The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. You see what this is saying? Jesus, when he speaks, God is speaking.

And when we looked at the Old Testament, we saw prophets like Ezekiel, and they were given the spirit in a measure, a small amount in a sense, of the spirit to do a certain task, to speak on behalf of God in a particular context.

But Jesus is different. The Father gives him the spirit without measure, without limit, so that the fullness of God dwells in Jesus. So when you hear Jesus speak, you are hearing God himself speak.

And there is more. It says there that the Father loves the Son. It's not just that Jesus is showing us God. Jesus, the Father, loves the Son.

[23 : 30] And this means a lot. In catechism, we've been learning a lot about the importance of the Trinity. And some of us might think, well, the Trinity is a big, difficult subject. I don't want to even talk about it. But it has such an importance for you and me because God cannot be love.

He cannot say he is God, he is love, unless there is more than one person in God. Because love has to have relationship. Someone must give love and somebody must receive it as well.

And so God's nature right within himself is that he is giving and receiving love all the time in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We're seeing a picture of heaven here.

The Father loves the Son. And not only that, but God's nature is to share his love outside of himself. That's what Jesus is about.

God takes joy in bringing people into that relationship of love within God. That's where we come in because in God's love, the Father has taken everything in the universe, including the destiny of you and me, all of humanity, and he has put it into Jesus' hands.

[24 : 45] That's what that verse says. And that's why Jesus' rule is such a loving rule. He is actually ruling in such a way that people are brought into the very life of God.

And so that answers the question, why does Jesus come as a witness from heaven to earth with God's own words? Why does he come with that kind of authority to rule?

And very simply, it's so that as you hear his words, you will receive life. You will have it. God comes to save you to himself in Jesus.

And he has the power and the authority we're seeing here to be raised up on a cross to die for the sins of the whole world. And this way to bring you and me into the loving life of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit so that you know that you are God's daughter.

You know that you are God's son because you can trust Jesus for it completely. That's what John's saying. So I want to close by saying that what John is teaching us here and John the evangelist, the apostle who wrote this, puts this here because he is saying our response to Jesus is our response to God himself, the living God.

[26 : 09] And it is actually a matter of life and death. That's why this passage ends by saying 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 that's quite a powerful passage. It is the only time in John where we see the anger of God. And that anger is there because it is rebellion against God to reject his son Jesus.

Because you are rejecting God here. You're rejecting the only one who can forgive sin, who can bring you into fellowship with the bridegroom to enter the very loving life of God.

You are saying no to that. And so you can't see real life because you are saying no to God's real love and the life of knowing him. You see, all God has to offer us really, in the end, is himself.

And that's everything. And we cannot reject Jesus because in doing that we reject God himself. Throughout John we're going to see that we're going to be called time and time again to believe, to trust, to obey God.

[27 : 28] Because that decision, Jesus will say, is everything. It means everything in your life.

When he calls us to believe and to obey, he is calling us to make room for God himself in our life.

To give up our life so that we can actually receive his life. To make room so that he can give himself to us. I love the way C.S. Lewis put this.

He said, and I'll end with this, he says, for each of us the Baptist's words are true. John the Baptist. He must increase, I must decrease. Because he has in the last resort nothing to give to us but himself.

And he can only give that in so far as our self-affirming will retires. retires. And then makes room for him in our souls.

Because he says, Jesus claims all. Because he is love and he must bless. That's his nature. He cannot bless us unless he actually has us.

[28 : 32] When we try to keep within us an area that is our own, we try to keep within us an area of death. We actually, you know, we're pushing away life. And therefore, in love, he claims all.

And there is no bargaining with him. That's what it means to respond to Jesus who has revealed God to us, who is the very life of God.

And so today is the day of salvation. It is the day to receive God's grace in Jesus. In fact, every day is. And so our prayer for each other should be may God increase, may Jesus increase in your life and my life.

And may I decrease, may I make room for him in every aspect of my life so that your joy might be full. So you might be overjoyed.

You might know all of the blessings that God has given to you because you have made room for it. And that way, the deep blessing of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be with you and remain with you always.

[29 : 41] Amen. Amen.