

The Light Shines in the Darkness (Christmas Eve)

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Date: 24 December 2017

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- [0 : 0 0] It's found on page 888 in your pew Bible. This morning we're concluding the sermon series we've done through this month during the season that is often called Advent.
- We've been looking at the figure of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the figure in the New Testament who introduces Jesus, who prepares the way for His coming. And as we consider Jesus coming into the world, His incarnation at Christmas, we've been listening to the words of John the Baptist.
- We've seen his role as the one who prepares the way for the Lord. We've looked at his message of repentance. Last week we looked at his focus where he says, look, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
- And today we're going to look at John the Baptist's character, in particular his humility. You know, one of the themes of the Christmas story is the humility of Jesus Christ in coming into this world, becoming one of us, coming to save and serve and rescue us.
- But John the Baptist also is a picture of humility in front of Jesus. And so that's what we're going to look at this morning in this story.
- [1 : 2 0] So I'm going to read John chapter 3, beginning at verse 22. Would you read along with me? After this, Jesus and His disciples went into the Judean countryside, and He remained there with them and was baptizing.
- John also was baptizing at Enon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized, for John had not yet been put in prison. Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.
- And they, that is, John's disciples, came to John and said to him, Rabbi, he who is with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.
- John answered, a person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before Him.
- 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.
- [2 : 3 1] He must increase, but I must decrease. 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. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.
- 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. 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, when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptize but only his disciples, he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.

Well, what do we see in this story? The Gospel of John was written in a time and place where most people couldn't read, but people frequently told and remembered stories.

[3 : 43] And one of the ways that people remembered stories without writing them down was by using familiar patterns and structures. One of these commonly used patterns is called a chiasm. That's sort of the technical term for it.

You can also call it a sandwich. In a sandwich, you've got the bread on the outside and the meat on the inside, right? And in a story that's structured as a chiasm, you have a correspondence between the beginning and the end, the outside parts, but the most important point is found in the middle.

And I believe that we see this pattern here in this chapter. I've laid out the pattern for you in the bulletin. If you turn to the center of the bulletin, there's a little chart in there that lays it out. And so I want to lead us through this passage today from the outside in and finally to get to the heart of the passage, which is verse 30, where John the Baptist says, he must increase and I must decrease.

And that's where we'll see his humility, and that's what we'll consider as our main point of our message today. But as you can see, the passage begins and ends with storyline, right, with people doing things.

And then in the middle, there are two speeches. So first, let's look at the story briefly in verses 22 to 26, and then chapter 4, 1 through 3.

[4 : 58] Notice how the story begins. Jesus and his disciples, they go out into the countryside. He stays there for a while. He's baptizing. Now, that's an interesting detail, because so far, the only person we've seen baptizing is John the Baptist, right?

That's why he's called John the Baptist or the baptizer. And now we hear that Jesus and his disciples are doing the same thing. And verses 23 and 24 clarifies this is before John was put in prison, right?

John is also baptizing people. He's in a place where there's plenty of water. That's a favorite verse of Baptist churches, by the way. There's plenty of water, right? He wasn't just sprinkling. He was probably dunking.

Anyway, that's a side point. That's not essential to what baptism is. But anyway, I can't resist that. Anyway, so John is leading a movement where people are getting baptized, and Jesus is leading a movement where people are getting baptized as well.

Now, verse 25, things start getting a little hairy. Some of John's disciples get into a discussion or perhaps a debate about purification.

[6 : 03] So perhaps they were talking about John's baptism compared to other Jewish purification rituals. John doesn't tell us the details of their conversation, but what comes out of it is verse 26.

John's disciples come to John and say, Look, Jesus is baptizing too. And now everybody's going to him. Now, notice how these same details are picked up at the end of this story in chapter 4, verse 1 to 3.

Right? Verse 22, Jesus went into Judea. Chapter 4, verse 3, he left Judea. Those are sort of the bookends. Again, go one step in. Jesus is baptizing. Actually, chapter 4, verse 2 clarifies, Jesus himself didn't baptize.

It was his disciples who actually did the baptizing. I mean, think about it. If Jesus himself had baptized, everyone back then would have wanted him to baptize you. Right?

I mean, why would I let one of Jesus' disciples baptize me if Jesus himself would do it? So Jesus stays out of that. He's like, That's not the point. That's not the primary reason I'm here, to personally baptize people.

[7 : 06] He's here to proclaim the kingdom of God and fulfill the mission God has given him. So, you know, if you're a follower of Christ, you should get baptized. But you know, the person who baptizes you is not that important.

That's much less important. And then verse 26 comes back in chapter 4, verse 1, the same point about Jesus was baptizing more disciples than John.

Now, that's really the issue that starts off this passage. Right? John's been leading this movement. He's a voice crying out in the wilderness. People are coming to him, listening to his preaching, getting baptized in the Jordan River.

But now John's disciples are worried because they've got competitors. Right? On the one side, there's the Jew in verse 25 who's stirring up a commotion with John's disciples and publicly debating with them about purification.

And on the other side, more and more people are going to Jesus and his disciples and being baptized by them. And so John's disciples are thinking, Oh, we've got two competitors. We've got the traditionalists on one side, and we've got this upstart Jesus on the other side.

[8 : 16] And he's outperforming us. And that's the concern they're expressing in verse 26. They say, John, you gave your stamp of approval to this Jesus, and now he's taking all your business.

You can't be happy about that. You can't just let him do that. You've got to stand up for yourself. You've got to do something about this. It's not fair. It's not fair. Have you ever felt that way?

It's not fair. When I was five years old, my sister was born. Previously, I had been an only child.

I had even prayed for a sister. I think I prayed for a brother. But regardless, I felt it was an answer to prayer when I got a sister. And then after she was born, I became wickedly jealous because I was furious at this new creature who had suddenly become the center of attention, and I no longer was.

Envy, jealousy, comparison, competitiveness, they're deeply ingrained in human nature, even from the youngest age. In our house, we call it the green-eyed monster. But, you know, this isn't just a problem that younger, immature children have sometimes.

[9 : 35] Envy, jealousy, it takes its root in all of us, even in...and we can dress it up in all kinds of ways.

I remember a few years ago when there was a new church that was being planted in downtown New Haven. Now, that's happened at least four times in the last ten years or so, just so you know.

Two of the church plants have since died. Two of the church plants have survived and are thriving. You know, when you're part of a church that's been around for a while, there's a temptation to get cynical about the upstarts.

Who do they think they are? Do they really think they can reach New Haven better than we do? Why don't they ever ask our opinion about things before they start their own thing? Or maybe we just sit back and fold our arms and say, let's see how this one goes.

J.C. Ryle wrote this in his commentary on verse 26. He wrote, Josh Moody put it this way.

[10 : 57] He wrote, Jealousy is often the reason for carefully worded disagreements between people in ministry, how damaging it is to our witness to Christ. But what we'll see here in verses 27 to 30 as we move toward the heart of the passage is that John the Baptist doesn't follow his disciples down that path.

He doesn't follow them down the path of jealousy and complaining and self-pity and scorn. Instead, he chooses a path of humility and joy.

So, let's look at John's answer, verses 27 to 30. Verse 27, John begins by stating a very broad principle.

A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven, that is from God. It starts with a very broad principle about all human beings and God.

The Apostle Paul makes the same point, 1 Corinthians 4, 7. He says, What do you have that you didn't receive? And if then you have received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

[12 : 10] Everything we have, we have received from God. The psalmist said, That's where John begins.

That's where humility begins, is with this general sense of who we are as human beings before our creator God. God is God.

I, we are not. Our skills, our possessions, our abilities, our successes, they're all gifts. All that we are and all that we have, we've received from God.

Now, this kind of humility shouldn't make us passive, as if we should just sit back and do nothing. John the Baptist was not passive here. He saw a good opportunity and took it.

He found a place where there was plenty of water, and he had plenty of people coming to him to be baptized. But at the same time, he could freely admit that he wasn't in control of the outcome of his ministry.

[13 : 09] And he wasn't trying to be in control of something that was ultimately out of his hands and ultimately not his responsibility. He was willing to say, God gave this to me in the first place.

He gave it to me. He can take it away. He can make it bigger. He can make it smaller. It's not mine to say. And it's not mine to complain.

John Calvin began his book, The Institutes, with a chapter entitled, The Knowledge of God and That of Ourselves Are Connected. He says, In knowing God, each of us also knows himself.

We understand who we really are when we see who God really is. And Calvin goes on to say, he says, It's not just enough to acknowledge that there's a God out there who's worthy of our worship.

Oh, yeah, God exists. He's there. But he says, No, we must be persuaded that he is the fountain of every good. That we must seek nothing elsewhere than in him.

[14 : 20] That no drop will be found, either of wisdom and light or of righteousness or power or genuine truth, which does not flow from him and of which he is not the cause.

Thus we may learn to await and seek all these things from him and thankfully to ascribe them once received to him. So that's where humility begins, of knowing who we are as human beings before the God who made us.

But then John gets more specific. He doesn't just talk about people and God in general. He talks about himself in light of Jesus. He says, Let me tell you who I am and also who I'm not.

And who I am is defined by who Jesus is. So verse 28. In verse 28 and verse 29, he makes a contrast.

He says, Here's who I'm not and here's who I am. Verse 28, he says, I am not the Christ. I'm not the Messiah. I'm not the Savior of the world. I'm not the King of glory.

[15 : 25] I have been sent before him. John's saying, I'm the herald preparing the way, announcing the king's arrival like the police motorcycle that goes ahead of the presidential motorcade, clearing the streets, saying, Make way for the one who is coming.

In verse 29, he uses another image. He says, I'm not the bridegroom. I'm his friend. I'm not the guy who's getting married here. I'm not the center of attention here.

I'm just the wedding planner. I'm just the best man. I'm just the officiant. The friend of the bridegroom played an important role in weddings back then.

And he was sort of like the wedding planner, the best man, and the officiant all in one. I don't know. Maybe you've played some of those roles in somebody's wedding. Maybe you've helped organize the details.

Maybe you've been part of the wedding party. As someone who's officiated many weddings, I'm standing here in the center. But you know, the wedding is never about me. Right?

[16 : 31] If you're part of the wedding party, you don't ever want to make that day about you. You don't ever want to take the focus off the couple who's getting married. Because it's about them and the promises they're making to each other before God.

So the bridegroom's friend might have been responsible for all kinds of things back then, organizing the details, communicating with the fiancée in advance of the ceremony, making sure the bride and groom both arrived safely, presiding over the wedding, making sure everything goes without a hitch.

But the bridegroom's friend must never become the center of attention at the wedding. He must never get between the couple who are to be married. He must never put himself in the place of the bridegroom.

His role is to do his job and see the marriage happen and rejoice in their union and go off on his way. You know, that's what humility looks like.

Humility doesn't mean being passive or timid or silent. It doesn't mean hiding in a corner. It doesn't mean being complacent when there's wrongdoing and injustice that need to be addressed.

[17 : 39] It doesn't mean never speaking the truth or confronting someone. Humility is knowing who you are in relation to Jesus and doing your job with confidence, but never putting yourself in his place.

And that's what John does. John says, I'm a voice crying out in the barren wilderness. Make way for the long-awaited king.

But now John says, I hear another voice. I hear a voice that is stronger and wiser and more worthy than mine. Listen to that voice.

The voice of the king. The voice of the good shepherd himself who calls his own sheep by name. John says, The king has come. And so my voice is going to fade into the background.

And that's just fine. He says, I'm the bridegroom's friend. I'm here to make the preparations for the wedding and get everything ready.

[18 : 42] And I'm like the wedding officiant who steps on the stage to call everyone to attention and announce that the groom has arrived. And today he will be married to his bride. And my greatest happiness is seeing their union take place.

I rejoice greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Now I can walk off the stage and be happy. He must increase. And I must decrease.

That's the heart of this passage. These are John's last words in the gospel of John. The last words that he speaks. He must increase and I must decrease.

You know, John doesn't just grudgingly acknowledge that this is God's will for Jesus to take his, to not just take his place, but to step into the center of things and accomplish the work that God has sent him to do.

John is, John's not just like, oh yeah, well, I guess that's God's will. I guess I have to give into it. No, he rejoices in that. He says it's a good thing.

[19 : 53] Because all along, John has been saying, it's not about me. It's about him. All along, John has been saying, I'm not the Messiah. I'm just here to prepare the way.

Do you know who you are in relation to Jesus? I mean, in some ways, John's role as a prophet and a forerunner is unique. But in his humility, he's a model for every Christian believer.

John was full of joy, even when his ministry was diminishing. Even when his disciples came to him and said, everybody's going to Jesus now.

And not you. Now, obviously, they were even exaggerating because some people were still coming to John to be baptized. And then, if they were coming to John to be baptized, he was going to teach them and baptize them and point them toward Jesus.

That's what he was doing. He was going to keep being faithful. As long as God gave him work to do. But John was full of joy, even when he realized that he was on the way out.

[21 : 01] And John may not have known this, but his life was about to get much harder. Verse 24 reminds us of this. John keeps preaching.

He's bold. He confronts King Herod about King Herod's immoral and adulterous relationship that he was in. And Herod responds to that by locking him up in prison and keeping him locked up for a while and eventually cutting off his head.

That's how his life was going to end. Being imprisoned and unjustly executed. Now, John may not have been able to know that. But John was still full of joy because he had seen Jesus.

And he saw people listening to Jesus and being baptized by his disciples and believing in his name. And John says, my joy is complete.

That's what it's all about. Brothers and sisters in Christ, this joy can be ours today. Even in the midst of hardships, even if things seem to be trending down in your own life and going badly, even if it seems like the greatest times, the greatest successes in your life or your ministry or your career are behind you.

[22 : 41] You can have this joy if you see Jesus. You can have this joy of knowing that he has come, that he is here, he has fulfilled his promises. If John the Baptist's words in verses 27 to 29 highlight his own lesser role, I must decrease.

John the Apostle's reflections in verses 31 to 36 highlight Jesus' greater and increasing role. He must increase. Now, some people think verses 31 to 36 continues the words of John the Baptist.

I think it's better to understand these verses as the reflections of John the Gospel writer. John the Baptist is not the same as John the Gospel writer. I know it's a little confusing. They're two different people.

But regardless of who you think is speaking, the point is really the same. You can see the correspondences either way. Verses 35 to 36, we see the principle of verse 27 applied to Jesus.

A person can only receive what heaven gives. And then verse 35, John says, God the Father has given all things, everything, into the hand of his Son.

[23 : 48] everything has been given to Jesus, including, verse 36, eternal life and the ability to bestow eternal life on all who believe in him.

Jesus has a greater authority. And then verses 32 to 34, we see the theme of witness or testimony, which is a big theme throughout John's Gospel. Verse 28, John's disciples bear witness about what he had said.

But in verse 32, Jesus bears witness. And Jesus' witness is even weightier than John's. Verse 34, Jesus, he whom God has sent, that's referring to Jesus here, utters the words of God for he gives the Spirit without measure.

So he has a greater authority. He has a weightier testimony. And finally, verse 31 helps us understand verse 29 about where this bridegroom comes from. John makes it very clear.

Jesus has come from heaven. He is not just a human being. John is a mere human being. He's a creature of the earth, like every one of us.

[24 : 58] But isn't that what we celebrate at Christmas? He came down from heaven. He came to bring heaven's peace and joy.

Heaven is where God lives. He came to bring God's dwelling place into our hearts and lives. He came to be our Emmanuel, God with us.

So we see the greatness of Jesus. His authority is unlimited. His testimony is greater. And His origin is heavenly. And so John, the gospel writer, is saying we should stand in awe of Him.

He must increase. I want to go back to verse 29 for just a bit. This imagery of the bridegroom or the groom at the wedding.

The Old Testament prophets frequently used this imagery of a bridegroom and a bride to speak of the relationship between God and His people Israel. So Jeremiah chapter 2, God is speaking to His people.

[26 : 02] He says, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness like a newly married couple starting out their life together.

But then the people of Israel entered into the promised land that God had purchased for them and then everything went downhill. The people were unfaithful to their promises to God. They bowed down to idols made of silver and gold.

They worshiped political power. They committed sexual sins and eventually God gave them what they were asking for. He gave them over to the chaos of their own twisted desires but God didn't give up on them.

Despite their unfaithfulness, He promised that He would come and make a new covenant with them. And that's what the prophet Isaiah was speaking about in that passage we read earlier.

Isaiah said, You shall no more be called forsaken and your land shall no more be called desolate but you shall be called my delight is in her and your land married for the Lord delights in you.

[27 : 00] As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride so shall your God in her. you shall be called desolate who simply see dependence everywhere and you yearn and your land so shall their and your be called desolate engr noted that That he can be called desolate and they have a wedding that that Oh SI translating the thunder .

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[30 : 27] Thank you.

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[32 : 57] Thank you.

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