



# The Gospel of John

## Session Seven: John the Baptist's Final Testimony

### THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

In today's text, we will examine the last account of the public teaching of John the Baptist. Here, John the Baptist's disciples realized that their teacher's influence was waning, and Christ's was increasing. Rather than take offense, John assumed a humble posture of joyful surrender to Christ's lordship and supremacy in all things.

It can be difficult to set aside our own ambitions and plans to allow Jesus's authority and rule in our lives. However, as believers, our eyes are to be fixed on Jesus as we allow Him to be first in our lives and priorities. As John the Baptist famously said in John 3:30, *"He must increase, but I must decrease."*

In this session, look for opportunities to discuss how we can set aside our personal agendas to passionately follow where Jesus leads. What does it look like to joyfully surrender to Jesus's leadership in all areas of our lives?

### TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

*John 3:22-36*

### THE MAIN IDEA

John the Baptist declared Jesus's preeminence and his own role in preparing the way for Jesus.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

*What might be Christ's standard for greatness in this season of your life? In other words, what does faithful obedience look like today? How does that look different than what the world would deem great for you?*

### SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

#### John 3:22-26

An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over ceremonial cleansing. The appropriate means of achieving ceremonial purification was of great interest to many in the Jewish community. In coming to John over the matter, the question of Jesus's ministry in relation to John's ministry was surfaced. John's reply affirmed his previous testimony about Jesus, as well as providing an important insight into John's character.

#### John 3:27-30

Knowing a teachable moment had presented itself, John informed his students that one "can receive only what is given him from heaven." The point of this affirmation is clear. John understood his role in relation to Jesus to be that of the "best man" to the groom at a wedding. John instructed those that had supported and followed his ministry that Jesus must become greater, while he must become less.

#### John 3:31-36

John knew that he was "from the earth," while Jesus, as God's Son, was "from heaven." John taught his disciples that their relation to Jesus determines life itself, for rejection of Jesus brings about God's wrath. Therefore, the one who accepts Jesus and the truth of His message avoids God's wrath, participates in the life of the Spirit, and has life eternal.



## START HERE

As Jesus's public ministry grew, John the Baptist's began to diminish. People who had followed John, including some of his own disciples, began to follow Jesus instead. Rather than take offense, John embraced the increasing visibility and authority of Jesus. None of us can hang onto our positions, influence, and leadership forever. We can double down, trying to maintain a certain position or notoriety, or, like John the Baptist, we can recognize the most important thing we do in life is make Christ known. When we shift our priorities from making a name for ourselves to lifting up the name of Jesus, we encounter joy, peace, and purpose for our lives.

## DISCUSS

*Does achieving personal greatness in our own lives really matter? How could pursuing greatness, fame, or recognition keep us from experiencing satisfaction in Jesus?*

## ADDING CLARITY

Competition between John's disciples and those of Jesus was not encouraged by either leader. Such diversionary activity would take away from the main event—God sent His Son into the world to bring salvation to the lost. Twenty-three times in this book John records references by Jesus to the one who sent Him.

## REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

### 1. Ministry in Transition—From Forerunner to Witness

*John 3:22-26: After this, Jesus and His disciples went to the Judean countryside, where He spent time with them and baptized.*

*John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water there. People were coming and being baptized, since John had not yet been thrown into prison.*

*Then a dispute arose between John's disciples and a Jew about purification. So they came to John and told him, "Rabbi, the one you testified about, and who was with you across the Jordan, is baptizing—and everyone is going to him."*

#### *Unpacking John 3:22-26*

A common challenge for children and adolescents (and if we're honest, sometimes adults too) is navigating the tricky waters of friendship. How does one react, for example, when a friend gets a better grade on an exam than you, gets invited to a party you don't, or receives the promotion for which you've been working? Can friendships survive competition, comparison, or change? As followers of Jesus, the way we love others reflects what we believe about God's love for us. This week, as we look at John the Baptist's last recorded public ministry, notice ways in which he navigated the unique dynamics of his relationship with Jesus. As John the Baptist



transitioned from forerunner of Jesus to witness of His life and miracles, we'll see how he stepped aside, joyfully, in submission to Christ.

*“After this, (His encounter with Nicodemus), Jesus and his disciples went to the Judean countryside, where he spent time with them and baptized” (v. 22)* As Jesus's public ministry expanded beyond Galilee, He and the disciples moved into the Judean countryside. Whether or not Jesus ever baptized others is a grey area. John 4:1-2 (which will be covered in part next week) indicates that Jesus at least oversaw baptisms performed by His disciples, even if He was not baptizing directly. One possible reason Jesus did not perform baptisms was to prevent sectarianism, or individuals putting themselves into groups based on who baptized them. As you might imagine, those baptized by Jesus might be tempted to think they had a spiritual upper hand over other brothers and sisters.

Paul was troubled by the idea in 1 Corinthians 1:12-15 when he said, *“What I am saying is this: One of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you were baptized in my name.”*

*“John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water there. People were coming and being baptized, since John had not yet been thrown into prison” (v. 23).* This encounter between Jesus's disciples and John the Baptist is not recorded in any of the other three Gospels, just as the book of John does not contain the story of John the Baptist's arrest. This is a good reminder that the intention of the gospel writers was not to present four identical accounts, rather to truthfully record the life and teachings of Christ from slightly different perspectives. (To learn more about the arrest and later execution of John the Baptist, read Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6:14-20, and Luke 3:18-20.)

*“Then a dispute arose between John's disciples and a Jew about purification. So they came to John and told him, “Rabbi, the one you testified about, and who was with you across the Jordan, is baptizing—and everyone is going to him” (vv. 25-26).* As Jesus's popularity and influence grew, and John the Baptist's waned, his disciples stepped in to ask John's opinion. These questions about purification were really questions about influence—once Jesus had arrived, did John the Baptist's ministry matter anymore? As John's disciples witnessed the reality of the shifting tide of influence, they came to their rabbi in defense.

In this passage, John the Baptist's ministry was in transition. The one sent as a forerunner to the Messiah had done his job. He prepared people to receive Jesus. John was then able to take on a new role—witness to the Messiah—he received with joy. John knew his purpose from before he was even born. Remember the angel Gabriel's message to Zechariah when he announced John the Baptist's birth:



*“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb. He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.” (Luke 1:13b-17)*

A life spent pointing others to Jesus is never in vain. Whatever we accomplish on earth in terms of money, status, position, or influence will matter far less than whether we pointed people to Jesus. Toward the end of his life, the apostle Paul reflected on his own life and ministry and said, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. There is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved his appearing”* (2 Timothy 4:7-8). John the Baptist, like Paul, rejoiced in Christ’s appearing. This was the calling on their lives (and on all Christians) and they were faithful to the end.

## DISCUSS

- *Have you ever had a friend’s influence, popularity, or opportunity surpass yours? How did you respond? How did it impact your friendship?*
- *How was John the Baptist’s influence both decreasing and increasing at the same time?*
- *Would you describe yourself as a “witness to the Messiah”? How do people in your sphere of influence know you follow Jesus?*

## 2. Ministry in Submission—Jesus is Supreme

John 3:27-30: *John responded, “No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I’ve been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the groom. But the groom’s friend, who stands by and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the groom’s voice. So, this joy of mine is complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

### *Unpacking John 3:27-30*

In Scripture, God is described as a jealous God (Exodus 20:5), desiring to be first in our hearts. He is jealous of anyone of anything that we allow to rightly take His place of preeminence. He is not described as an envious God, wanting what belongs to someone else, because, as Psalm 24:1 says, *“The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the Lord.”* We, along with the rest of God, belong to the Lord. He desires to be first in our hearts and devotion. As John’s disciples noticed Jesus’s growing influence, John didn’t balk—he clarified how his role fits into God’s greater design. From this moment of transition, John pivoted into a more explicit witness posture. He willingly put aside his own platform to make Christ first. How can we do the same?



*“John responded, “No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven” (v. 27). Not only was John willing to set aside his ministry in light of Christ’s arrival, he also declared that whatever ministry he had was entrusted to him by Christ to begin with. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:7: “For who makes you so superior? What do you have that you didn’t receive? If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn’t received it?” Everything we have, including our talents and abilities, is a gift from God. John understood that his ministry was not of his own power or intelligence. He was a steward of what God had entrusted to him.*

*John continued, “You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I’ve been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the groom. But the groom’s friend, who stands by and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the groom’s voice. So this joy of mine is complete (vv. 28-29). Jesus is the bridegroom, and John the Baptist was His support, standing at His side and celebrating His arrival. The Church is the bride of Christ, wed to Him forever through the new covenant established by His blood (Hosea 2:19-20; Ephesians 5:32). John had no expression of envy in response to the bridegroom coming for His bride, the church. Instead, he expressed joy at the fulfillment of Scripture.*

*“He must increase, but I must decrease” (v. 30). John had completed the work God ordained before his birth. He had successfully pointed toward the Savior, and now his role was to step aside and give Jesus the center stage. While he would not have known about his upcoming arrest, John the Baptist sensed that the urgency and intensity of his ministry was diminishing as Jesus’s ministry grew. It was time to step aside so that the focus could be on Christ alone.*

Marshall Segal, in an article titled “The Joy of Living In Jesus’ Shadow” wrote, “Standing center stage at the highest moment in history, privileged with unprecedented anointing and authority, John launched his personal campaign with these seven words, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’ (John 3:30) . . . John received a lesser role before going to prison . . . John the Baptist wasn’t chasing the award for best supporting actor in a Gospel. If he was found with Jesus, as part of God’s plan to save the world, he was happy to be forgotten, happy to live and serve and even die in the shadows.”

Are we happy to live, and serve, and even die in the shadows? While we might say yes in a Bible study group, we often yearn for recognition and prominence and tend to respond with envy if others have more than we do. It’s human nature to desire recognition and popularity. Yet, when we chase after those things, we don’t find a fulfilled life. Real joy comes not from chasing titles or things, but from pursuing a relationship with Jesus, and allowing Him to be first in your heart and life.



## DISCUSS

- *In verse 29, John compared himself to “the friend of the groom.” How does this image deepen our understanding of his relationship to Jesus?*
- *John was content to decrease so that Jesus could increase. What does “He must increase, but I must decrease” look like in your life right now?*
- *Where do you struggle most with wanting recognition or control? How can you submit that to Jesus?*

### 3. Ministry in Witness—Eternal Life in the Son

John 3:31-36: *The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is from the earth is earthly and speaks in earthly terms. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, and yet no one accepts his testimony. The one who has accepted his testimony has affirmed that God is true. For the one whom God sent speaks God's words, since he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hands. The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him.*

#### *Unpacking John 3:31-36*

Have you ever planned a surprise party for a friend? Or perhaps you found just the right Christmas present for a friend and waited for months, anticipating his or her reaction to that thing that was “just right.” Friendship is built, not just on what we receive from the relationship, but on the joy, we receive in celebrating others—their gifts, talents, and accomplishments.

In this passage, John (the Gospel writer) inserted a paragraph of commentary on the conversation that had just taken place between John the Baptist and his disciples. After John the Baptist joyfully embraced the transition and pointed people to Jesus, John the Gospel writer explained *why* Jesus is worthy of that central place—what gives Him authority and what His mission means for humanity. This section gives us a succinct theological summary of Jesus's exalted status, authority, and the eternal ramifications of belief or unbelief.

*“The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is from the earth is earthly and speaks in earthly terms. The one who comes from heaven is above all” (v. 31).* John points to Jesus's exalted status. He is above all because He is from above. The great mystery of Christ is that He is both fully man and fully God. You might recall that John the apostle began his Gospel account in a similar fashion. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created” (John 1:1-3).* Jesus is eternal. He was present and working at the creation and thus has authority over all created things. John the Baptist, on the other hand, came “from the earth.” Jesus is supreme over any person, is altogether unique, and is worthy of our worship.



*“He testifies to what he has seen and heard, and yet no one accepts his testimony”* (v. 32). Because Jesus is from above, He spoke with authority about heavenly things. He did not speak as a prophet with a limited view of God’s kingdom or share mere theories about the kingdom of God. Jesus spoke about what He had personally observed. Though Jesus spoke with authority, and demonstrated that authority through miracles and healings, not everyone accepted his testimony. The same is true today. There has never been a time in history when the words and teachings of Christ are more accessible. People can read the Bible for free in nearly every language known to man. They can watch sermons from thousands of pastors around the world. They can witness the enduring witness of the church and the testimony of the changed lives of those who have put their faith in Christ. Yet, many will not accept Christ’s testimony.

*“The one who has accepted his testimony has affirmed that God is true. For the one whom God sent speaks God’s words, since he gives the Spirit without measure”* (vv. 33-34). It is not head knowledge of Christ that saves. We become believers when we, by faith, accept His testimony. As Paul wrote in Romans 10:13, *“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* When we accept the truth about Christ, we affirm the truth about God, and in that we are given the Holy Spirit, who confirms in our spirit that we are indeed children of God (Romans 8:16). Notice how the writer in these short two sentences highlighted the theology of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit, unique and in perfect unity.

*“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hands”* (v. 35). Jesus has authority over all things, because He is above all things. Because He has authority over all things, we, like John the Baptist, humbly submit ourselves under His authority and protection.

*“The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him”* (vv. 35-36). In this final sentence, the writer lays out his case—because Jesus has authority, we must yield to Him. If we believe in Christ, we will receive eternal life. If we reject Christ, we will receive eternal separation from God. Why?

Because God’s righteous anger at sin would remain on us. Here John is, in effect, giving away the end of the story. God’s wrath is judgment for sinners, of which we all belong. However, Jesus came to die on the cross, taking the punishment for our sin, and experiencing God’s wrath on our behalf. Now, Jesus is exalted above all through His death, burial, and resurrection. All who come to Him by faith experience new life in Christ and eternal fellowship with God through the Spirit.

Throughout the Gospel of John, you will encounter these short, summary statements on faith in Christ and salvation. We encountered them twice in chapter three alone. First, when John summarized Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus, and here as he summarized the gospel message. John later summarized the reason he wrote this book, *“But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”* (John 20:31). John used the word “believe” ninety-eight times in his gospel account, while the three Synoptic gospels combined used it just thirty-four times. Belief in Jesus is John’s theme, from start to finish.



## DISCUSS

- *According to these verses, why does Jesus have authority? What makes us reluctant to accept His authority over some aspects of our lives?*
- *From John's final testimony in verses 31–36, what are the eternal stakes for how people respond to Jesus today?*
- *John the apostle had multiple short statements that succinctly explained the good news. If given the opportunity, could you confidently share the good news of Jesus with someone? How will you prayerfully ask God to give you that opportunity? What might hold you back?*

## DEEPER FOCUS

### REFLECT ON THE TEXT

## DISCUSS

- *In our own ministries or Christian lives, how do we risk turning attention to ourselves rather than putting the focus on Christ?*
- *What does it look like in your context for “He must increase, I must decrease” to be lived out practically? What do you need to start or stop?*
- *How might you seek to prepare to share the good news of Jesus when given the opportunity?*

## RESPOND TO THE TEXT

What would it look like to willingly set aside some of your own wants, desires, and ambition to make space for God to write the story of your life He wants? What area of life do you feel hesitant to step aside from and give to Jesus? Why?

## APPLY

*How might you embrace John the Baptist's humility in the way you relate to Christ and others?*

## REFERENCES

Marshall Segall, “The Joy of Living in Jesus’ Shadow”, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-joy-of-living-in-jesus-shadow>