

## Chapter 7: The Rise of Jesus

*John 3:22–36*

As Jesus presses forward deeper into his own public ministry, natural questions begin to arise. What exactly does Jesus *do* as his ministry? How does Jesus relate to other ministers who are faithfully serving God around him—and especially, how does he relate to John the Baptist, who began his own public ministry before Jesus did? What are all these ministers working to accomplish ultimately? Of course, these questions continue forward into our present context as we continue to ask about the nature of true Christian ministry. What are we supposed to be doing, and how much room do we have to innovate? Ultimately, how do our ministries relate to the actual person of Jesus Christ? How are we supposed to understand our relative failures and successes in ministry? What should we think when the church across the street increases, but our own local church decreases?

Where Jesus addressed a seeker in Nicodemus in the first half of John 3, the narrative shifts to allow John the Baptist to teach us about the nature of true ministry. As John the Baptist begins to decrease, those closest to him feel that Jesus has done him a disservice, but the Baptist has a very different perspective. In this passage, we find one of the clearest descriptions in the whole Bible on the activity, the motivation, and the message of true Christian ministry. In our own ministry contexts, this is a message we desperately need to hear as we continue to seek to follow Jesus.

### **The Baptism of Jesus (John 3:22–26)**

While none of the Synoptic Gospels mention it, the Gospel of John here tells us that Jesus' public ministry included the administration of baptism (John 3:22). A bit later in John 4:2, the Evangelist clarifies what he means by this, adding, "although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples." Jesus did not personally administer the baptisms, but Jesus oversaw a ministry of baptism that was a part of his plan for making disciples from the beginning.

In some ways, the fact that Jesus enters into a ministry of administering baptism should not surprise us. Jesus always considered John the Baptist, whose ministry consisted largely of baptizing, to be a true prophet, and "more than a prophet" as the one who prepared the way for Jesus' coming (Matt. 11:9–10).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Jesus insisted that he himself must be baptized by the Baptist in order to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Finally, after Jesus' resurrection, our Lord commissioned baptism as one of the core elements for making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19), a pattern that the early church carefully followed (e.g., Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 35–36; 9:18; 10:47; 16:15, 33; 18:8). Before Jesus' public ministry, during his public ministry, and after his resurrection, baptism is at the heart of the true ministry.

### Christian Baptism?

Christian baptism as we practice it today requires that baptism be administered by a lawfully

ordained minister, with water, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As for lawful ordination, we know that John the Baptist was sent to baptize by prophetic revelation (John 1:33), and Jesus himself commissioned his disciples to baptize. Moreover, both baptisms clearly involved water (John 3:23). But, it is unlikely that either baptism was administered in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, since the Triune nature of God is something that Jesus will spend the rest of his teaching ministry revealing slowly. Because of this, it is difficult to imagine that the disciples would baptize people into these three names, when they (rightly) believed that God is one (Deut. 6:4). So, even though John the Baptist and Jesus' disciples were lawfully ordained ministers who used water, the baptism they performed cannot be classified as Christian baptism in the fullest sense. Instead, it would be better to see the baptism of Jesus' disciples as a "transition" between John's baptism and Christian baptism.<sup>2</sup> Probably, the baptism of Jesus' disciples was still a baptism of repentance, like John's baptism, "though with some implication of adherence to Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

Still, to ask whether the baptism of Jesus' disciples fully qualifies as "Christian" baptism is a bit misleading. It isn't as though Judaism continued without alteration up until the coming of Jesus, and then everything switched in a single moment to Christianity. Jesus came *both* to fulfill the entirety of Mosaic law (Matt. 5:17–20) *and* to inaugurate a new covenant that would set aside the obsolete Mosaic covenant after Jesus fulfilled it (Heb. 8:13). Jesus's earthly ministry represents a time of transition, where he *both* brings the old covenant to its climactic fulfillment *and* he ushers in something new. So, it is only on the Day of Pentecost (after Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) that the apostles began to publicly baptize (Acts 2:38, 41) in the fully Christian sense that we know today. Furthermore, it is a mistake to cling to John's baptism of repentance alone *after* Jesus has come, since the whole point of John's baptism was to prepare people for the coming of Jesus (Acts 19:1–7). Nevertheless, it would also be a mistake to say that the baptism of John or the baptism that Jesus sends his disciples to do here in John 3 represents something *totally* different from Christian baptism.

By way of analogy, consider Jesus' preaching ministry. Does Jesus' preaching count as "Christian" preaching? Jesus purposefully veils his preaching to the public (Matt. 13:10–17), and even his disciples thoroughly misunderstand him until after the resurrection (Matt. 15:16; Mark 6:52; Luke 18:34, 24:18–27; John 3:22, 14:9, 16:29–33). In other words, Jesus does not yet proclaim in his own preaching all the fullness of revelation that we in the church have enjoyed since the completion of the New Testament. As one example, Jesus does sometimes mention his impending death, but never plainly (e.g., John 2:19). Christian ministers, by contrast, are commanded to preach nothing but "Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Therefore, if we evaluate Jesus' preaching by the standards to which we are held, Jesus falls short. That evaluation, of course, is absurd. In his preaching (like in his baptismal ministry), Jesus' purpose was to *prepare* those around him for his coming death and resurrection. In our preaching, we are called to *proclaim* what Jesus has already accomplished. How could we not call Jesus' preaching "Christian" preaching? In the same way, how could we not call Jesus' baptism a "Christian" baptism, even though Jesus had not fully developed it to be what we practice today?

The important point is not whether we can discern differences between what preaching or baptism looks like during Jesus' public ministry compared to today. Instead, the important point is to recognize the similarities shared between Jesus' practices and our practices. Presumably, Jesus' disciples were baptized by John, or perhaps at this point by one another as they began their baptismal

ministry under the authority of Jesus. But after this point, we do not read anywhere in the New Testament that they must be baptized again after Jesus' resurrection in order to have a more complete "Christian" baptism. The emphasis of the New Testament falls on the *continuity* that our ministry shares with the ministry of Jesus, not on any perceived discontinuity.<sup>4</sup>

### Why Baptism At All?

Why, though, does Jesus bother with baptism at all? In some Christian circles, baptism is overemphasized, with the suggestion that anyone who has passed through the baptismal waters never needs to worry about their eternal salvation again. In these cases, water baptism becomes a kind of lucky charm that superstitiously wards off evil spirits and even the wrath of God. This view of baptism does not hold up to the teaching of John the Baptist, who draws a clear distinction between the water baptism that ministers perform and the baptism of the Holy Spirit that the Messiah would administer (John 1:33). Water baptism is connected to Spirit baptism as a sign (signifying a greater reality) and a seal (authenticating by God's own authority that the promises of the gospel are trustworthy), but water baptism cannot *force* the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Water baptism, on its own, is not enough; one must be born of water *and* the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). Overestimating the power of water baptism is a serious error, since it allows unconverted, unrepentant sinners to believe that they have escaped the wrath of God, when in fact, they are condemned already because of their unbelief (John 3:18).

In other Christian circles, though, baptism is considerably *underemphasized* to the point of obscurity. In such contexts, it is difficult to get a clear answer for why God would *want* us to practice baptism at all, so that the only explanation given for the practice is to remind us that Jesus has commanded us to do so—that is, baptism is tragically mischaracterized as law rather than grace. Baptism becomes simply a hoop that new believers must jump through, and each time we administer baptism, we feel that Christianity would be better off without such an odd ordinance. Commendably, many of these churches are confused about baptism precisely because they value the gospel of free grace in Jesus Christ, and they do not see where a practice like water baptism fits in with the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But if Jesus himself insists upon being baptized (Matt. 3:15), and if Jesus insists that ministry *must* involve baptism—both here during Jesus' earthly ministry (John 3:22; 4:1–2) and after Jesus' resurrection (Matt. 28:19)—then perhaps we should work a little harder to see baptism from Jesus' point of view.

The clearest picture we have of baptism comes during Jesus' baptism. There, the Father speaks through Jesus' baptism to declare his love and pleasure in his Son: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Additionally, we read that the Holy Spirit descends and remains on Jesus (Matt. 3:16; cf. John 3:33). Later at Pentecost, we see the role that the Son plays in our baptisms. There, Peter makes clear that baptism is in some way connected not only to the outpouring of the gift of the Holy Spirit, but also to the power of the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). In baptism, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit declare their great love toward us: the Father claims us as his child; the Son secures our forgiveness of sins through our faith; the Holy Spirit baptizes us with himself. We *hear* these promises in God's word, but God also gives us baptism to *feel* these promises in a physical sign. Baptism is God's gracious gift to announce the gospel to us, not an arbitrary commandment that we are obligated to follow blindly.

If we did not have baptism, but only God's word, we might fall into the opposite error of those

who overemphasize baptism. Indeed, if all we had were preaching and teaching, then we might come to imagine that the only thing necessary for our discipleship is to perfect our *minds*. Through physical sacraments like baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus lays claim to our entire personhood, body, mind, and spirit. Apart from God's word, our sin twists the sacraments into superstitious charms, but if God had given us *only* his word and *not* his sacraments, our sinful pride might twist our understanding of discipleship by considering *only* the development of our theology. We need *both* the teaching and preaching of God's word to instruct us *and* the administration of God's sacraments to purify and feed us. We are whole people, and God wants more than just one part of our personhood in our minds; he wants *all* of us.

Ultimately, God's claiming of the entirety of our personhood will require *more* than preaching and *more* than the sacraments. These are the activities of true Christian ministry, but our activities in ministry depend upon the work of the Holy Spirit to give us what Jesus discussed with Nicodemus in the previous passage: the new birth (John 3:1–8). The solution to hypocrisies of the mind or our external actions is not to downplay the value of the ministry of the word and the sacraments. Rather, the solution is to recognize that these ministries are the means that God promises to use to show us his grace, by his Spirit. We ought to give ourselves to the word and the sacraments as we prayerfully ask God to do the work of giving us life in Christ through these ministries.

Therefore, rejoice in your baptism. Remember your baptism. Improve upon your baptism by seeking to lay hold to the promises God made to you there in faith. When Satan tries to get you to despair in believing that God does not love you, remind him that God has laid claim to you in the same way that he laid claim upon his own Son: through your baptism. Jesus put baptism alongside preaching and teaching at the center of his ministry because of the unique way in which baptism communicates the purifying grace of the gospel. Let us therefore put baptism at the center of our ministry—not that people might look to baptism, but that people might look to Jesus Christ, the One to whom the sign of baptism points.

### A Baptismal Rivalry

During this baptismal ministry that Jesus' disciples performed under the oversight of their Master, Jesus and his disciples ministered 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)” (John 3:23–24). The Evangelist gives us two reasons that both Jesus and John the Baptist ended up at the same spot. First, water was plentiful in this area, which is obviously necessary for the work of water baptism in the days before plumbing. Second, “people were coming and being baptized,” since this happened during the time before John was imprisoned. Jesus set up his baptismal ministry near where John was baptizing for the same reason that new car dealerships spring up right next door to *other* car dealerships: there is value in going to where the people already are. This situation, of course, sets up the conflict that we will read about in a moment.

Before looking at the rivalry that developed between the disciples of John the Baptist and those of Jesus, it is worth observing that John the Evangelist goes out of his way to explain what might otherwise be perceived as a contradiction between this account of parallel baptismal ministries between the Baptist and Jesus in the Judean countryside. Worried that some might interpret the silence of the Synoptic Gospels about this period of time in Judea before Jesus went to Galilee (Matt. 4:11–12; Mark 1:13–14; Luke 4:13–14) as a contradiction to this story, the Evangelist explains that

this took place during the time before the Baptist was sent to prison. Matthew and Mark, then, explain that Jesus went to Galilee *after* hearing that John the Baptist had been arrested.<sup>5</sup> This aside helps demonstrate that John the Evangelist does indeed know what the Synoptic Gospels say, and that he writes his Gospel with a careful eye toward avoiding outright contradictions, even if he largely supplies stories and discourses that we do not find in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>6</sup>

The important part of this story arises in John 3:25–26: “Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. 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.’” While we do not know the identity of this “Jew,” nor the exact nature of the discussion that prompted John’s disciples to protest Jesus’ success to their master, we can discern enough from what John’s disciples say to understand the general sense of what is happening. The frustration of John’s disciples from the discussion makes perfect sense if we imagine that this “Jew” has raised questions over whether Jesus’ baptism represents a better purification than John’s baptism—especially in light of the fact that an increasing number of people have abandoned seeking John’s baptism to seek out Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

We will discuss the envy of John’s disciples in a moment, but we should first recognize the specific way that John describes this incident as a discussion that arose specifically “over purification” (John 4:25), and not directly as a power struggle. Craig Keener explains:

Purification rites were common throughout the Mediterranean world..., and early Judaism, which had developed biblical purification rituals, was no exception. Various baptistic sects, most notably the Essenes, may have competed in the wilderness, and these may have challenged the character of the Baptist’s immersions; but these sects and the Pharisees also condemned one another’s baptisms.<sup>8</sup>

We will miss the whole point of this passage if we do not notice that John the Evangelist is once again framing the ministry of Jesus in terms of purification—a subject that fascinated not only the Israelites, but the entire Mediterranean world. Earlier, the Evangelist told us that Jesus turned water into wine from “six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification” (John 2:6). Then, John tells us about how Jesus *cleansed* the temple during “the Passover of the Jews” (John 2:13).

Whatever else the ministry of Jesus is about, John the Evangelist wants us to know that the issue of purification is central. It is in this context that need for Jesus’ baptismal ministry makes the most sense, since the symbol of water baptism so vividly portrays the purifying nature of Holy Spirit baptism that Jesus came to bring. The Apostle Peter later draws this comparison powerfully, writing that “Baptism...now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21). Just as water removes dirt from your body, water baptism points to a baptism of the Holy Spirit that removes dirt from your soul through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to baptize because Jesus came to purify.

Nevertheless, John the Baptist had been baptizing before Jesus arrived for his public ministry. The disciples who have remained with John the Baptist have not yet grasped their Master’s own words that, even though Jesus comes *after* the Baptist in ministry, Jesus nevertheless ranks *before* the Baptist, since Jesus (as the eternal Word) *existed* before the Baptist from as the eternal Word (John

1:15, 30). Their jealousy for the position of their Master and their blindness to the incomparable glory of Jesus causes them to insist that something must be done to restore the Baptist to the primacy of ministry that he enjoyed before Jesus came on the scene. They even seem to accuse John the Baptist for the political miscalculation of endorsing Jesus (“he...to whom you bore witness!”; John 3:26), believing that Jesus has abused the generosity of John by eclipsing John’s stature and infringing upon John’s rightful ministry.<sup>9</sup>

### **“He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:27–30)**

With remarkable humility, John the Baptist entirely rejects his disciples’ line of thinking. What they are asking him to do misunderstands his entire purpose for life and ministry. Instead, John the Baptist offers one of the most profound reflections on the motivation of Christian ministry ever uttered:

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. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:27–30)

Losing his own personal influence does not cause John the Baptist to despair; rather, he sees the people flocking to Jesus as a reason for rejoicing. With each sentence, John offers a new, glorious glimpse of the kind of humility that every Christian ought to share. In this passage, John reminds us that ministry is not a right, but a gift.

#### Receiving Only What Heaven Gives

First, John teaches his disciples that “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.” D. A. Carson explains that we will find this verse difficult to understand if we try to find specific meanings in the context of this narrative for the “one thing” received or the “person” to whom that one thing is given, or the exact interaction of the “person” with “heaven” in the immediate surrounding context. Instead, Carson argues that “John casts his response in the form of a maxim, an aphorism. As such it is extremely broad: God’s sovereignty stands hidden behind all human claims, for a human being does not have anything but what he has received (cf. 1 Cor. 4:7).”<sup>10</sup> In other words, John explains that everything we have in life (including the ministry entrusted to us) comes as a gift from heaven.

One of the best ways to fight discontentedness is to recast our perspective away from the what we do *not* have to recognize with gratitude all that we *do* have—and to remember that everything we have comes purely as a gift of grace. You brought nothing into this world, and you will depart with nothing. You hold nothing by inherent right, but only provisionally and temporarily as a stewardship entrusted to you by God’s grace. When we truly recognize that everything comes to us as a gift, it becomes far easier to handle losing something, since we realize that it was never ours to begin with. Loss is always painful, but loss becomes unnecessarily painful when God must pry his gifts out of our clenched fingers.

### Consistency in Identity

Second, John reminds his disciples that his message has been consistent throughout his ministry. He asks his own disciples to bear *him* witness that he has always declared, “I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.” This was the message that he gave to the delegation of the religious leaders who had interviewed him in John 1:19–28, and John the Baptist reminds his disciples that he has never wavered from this understanding of his identity. If so, then why should his disciples find it so difficult to believe that he actually *wants* the Christ to ascend beyond his own ministry?

When we worship God—whether in private, in our families, or as the gathered corporate body of the church—part of what we are doing is simply acknowledging that we are not God, and that our highest calling is to worship the one who *is* God. Sometimes, worship can seem pointlessly repetitive, but God calls us to do this because he knows what is in us (John 2:23–25)—that is, he knows the stubbornness of our arrogance. Deep down, left to ourselves, we long to justify our own advancement and glorification above everyone around us, and even above God. Worship, then, has a formational function where we repeat basic truths about ourselves and about God, not because we forget the information, but because we need the information to travel the long journey from our heads down to our hearts. For that message to become embedded deeply into our souls requires long-term consistent practice in confessing that we are *not* the Christ.

### Joy in Jesus’ Success

Third, John the Baptist explains his position through the use of a vivid metaphor, where Jesus is the bridegroom about to take his bride, and John serves as the friend of the bridegroom: “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” (John 3:29). In this situation, it would be inappropriate for the friend of the bridegroom to insist upon some kind of rights over the bride.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the friend of the bridegroom rejoices to see the bridegroom come to take his bride. John is saying that he finds his joy (literally, his joy is “fulfilled”) in seeing Jesus finally come to take his bride (John 3:29). Of course, John the Baptist is not making this metaphor up, since the entire story of the Bible, from the Old Testament into the New, declares that the people of God belong as a bride to the bridegroom of God alone.<sup>12</sup> John the Baptist alone, however, recognizes that Jesus’ ministry is the fulfillment of that metaphor.

John’s words here shatter the notion that joy and success in ministry is a zero-sum competition. If we see Jesus’ success as a *threat* to our success, then we will necessarily be disappointed when the church across the street grows, but ours doesn’t. If, on the other hand, we see ourselves as Jesus’ best man, then any illusions that we have personal rights over the bride of Christ are shattered. Jesus’ success is *our* success, and Jesus’ joy is *our* joy, regardless of whether we are directly involved. What the world says about success and failure is irrelevant.

### He Must Increase, but I Must Decrease

John the Baptist’s logical conclusion of all this is profound: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). These are the words of a man who is so impressed with Jesus that he willingly steps out of the spotlight for fear that he might somehow overshadow Jesus. He has played an important role, to be sure, but that role is largely finished. The only thing left is for Jesus to continue

to increase in stature and glory, and for John to decrease—eventually, through imprisonment and martyrdom. John the Baptist was greater than any prophet of the Old Testament who had come before him; however, the Baptist came not to enshrine his own greatness, but to prepare the way for the One to whom he and everyone before him had testified, the Lord Jesus Christ. Herman Ridderbos writes, “The old has run its course; the time of fulfillment has come, in which, the more radiantly the rising sun begins to shine, the more John’s star will grow dim (his words here are often understood in the sense of the increase and decrease of the light of celestial bodies).”<sup>13</sup>

The fact that Jesus Christ is now glorified through his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension does not mean that we are somehow beyond the sin of stealing Christ’s glory. Our envy of Christ’s rightful rule and dominion is all the more foolish because we know the rest of the story that the disciples of John did not. Sinful pride, however, has never needed logic to hijack the human heart. John the Baptist was content to see himself decrease not because he focused so extensively on his own humility, but because he had grown to love and desire the increase of Christ more than anything else. The more overwhelmed with awe we are in the face of the glory of Christ, the less of a hold the sin of pride will hold in our lives.

### **“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:31–36)**

Although it is possible that John 3:31–36 records a continuation of the speech of John the Baptist from John 3:27–30, it is more likely that this section represents John the Evangelist’s editorial summary for the whole of John 3. This section pulls together not only what the Baptist is teaching his disciples, but also what Jesus explained to Nicodemus—and this section even underscores some of what the Evangelist had written in the prologue to the Gospel, from John 1:1–18. As such, these six verses offer a helpful recapitulation of everything we have read so far as Jesus launches his public ministry.

#### The Testimony of the One from Heaven

John the Evangelist writes:

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. (John 3:31–33)

In the immediate context, the sentence that “He who comes from above is above all” (John 3:31) differentiates the glory of Jesus from his ministers. John the Baptist and Jesus are not in direct competition, since John the Baptist is a servant of Jesus—one who is not worthy even to untie Jesus’ sandal (John 1:27). Jesus comes from above (that is, from heaven as the eternal Word), and therefore he is above all.

Additionally, remember that Jesus contrasted his authority to teach against the inability of Nicodemus and the other religious leaders to understand him on the basis that he (Jesus) had descended from heaven, while they were of the earth (John 3:9–13). Furthermore, this is the same idea that the Evangelist expressed in the prologue through the shocking truth that the true light,



through whom the whole world was made, was coming into the world, “yet the world did not know him” (John 1:10), and even “his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11). Jesus, who comes from heaven, is above all, but when he bears witness to what he has seen and heard as the commissioned Sent-One from God, “no one receives his testimony” (John 3:32). Again and again through this whole Gospel, we will see Jesus being misunderstood. Sometimes, the misunderstanding is defiant, as when the religious leaders demanded a sign to confirm his authority to cleanse the temple (John 2:18). Other times, Jesus’ misunderstanding will come from those who genuinely want to understand him (like Nicodemus; John 3:1–9), or even from his own disciples who love him devotedly but cannot put all the pieces together until after Jesus’ resurrection (e.g., John 2:22).

Still, misunderstanding and rejecting Jesus is not the only option: “Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true” (John 3:33). When John says that “no one” receives Jesus’ testimony (John 3:32), he is writing emphatically rather than absolutely. Anyone who does receive Jesus’ testimony thereby authenticates (“sets his seal”) that he believes God to be true. Coming to faith requires nothing less than the new birth of the Spirit in order to see and enter the kingdom of God, but the reward for such faith is the privilege of becoming a child of God: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13).

### All Things in the Son’s Hand

John the Evangelist continues:

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. (John 3:34–36)

One reason for understanding this section of John 3:31–36 as an editorial summary of the Gospel so far, rather than a continuation of John the Baptist’s words in John 3:27–30, is that the one “whom God has sent” in John 3:34 almost certainly refers to *Jesus*, and not to John the Baptist. It is Jesus, not John the Baptist, who receives the Spirit without measure. Remember, the Baptist testified that he only baptized with water, and that he was sent to baptize with water for the purpose of revealing Jesus to Israel (John 1:31). It is Jesus—not John—upon whom the Spirit both descended and remained (John 1:32–33). Even though John the Baptist did preach faithfully the words of God, his preaching and baptizing were provisional, pointing forward to the coming of Jesus who would teach pure heavenly doctrine (cf. John 3:12) and baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The next verse supplies another reason for seeing “he whom God has sent” as Jesus: “the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:35). In the immediate context, “all things” includes the Spirit “without measure”—that is, in an infinite abundance. We Christians receive grace “according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:7), but Christ himself receives all things—including the Spirit—without any limitation, for the purpose of distributing as he sees fit.<sup>14</sup> Along these lines, John the Evangelist had written earlier, “For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). What we receive, we receive from the *Son’s* fullness, which comes

from the generous outpouring of the Spirit from the Father. The interrelated work of each Person of the Trinity is critical to our salvation.

Therefore, “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” (John 3:36). As John has already insisted at several points in his Gospel (John 1:12, 29; 3:14–21), salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The one who believes in Jesus Christ has the eternal life that is in Christ already (John 1:4; 3:15–18). The only other option is to reject Christ, which John here describes as someone who “does not obey the Son,” or more literally, is “not to be persuaded by the Son.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, “the estrangement of unbelief” that is the natural result of rejecting of Jesus *is* the judgment (cf. John 3:19).<sup>16</sup> For this reason, “the wrath of God remains on” the one who does not obey the Son, since they continue to persist in their rejection of the true light who has come into the world.

The wrath of God is not a popular idea, since this doctrine seems (to modern ears) to reflect cruelty in God. On the contrary, God’s wrath is a reflection of his commitment to justice, or, as Leon Morris defines it, God’s wrath is “the settled and active opposition of God’s holy nature to everything that is evil.”<sup>17</sup> Apart from wrath, God has no means of addressing the great evil and injustice in this world. Indeed, if God did not ever bring his wrath against evil, then he would permit the gates of hell to reign forever over his creation. Instead, God’s final judgment against those who have resolutely rejected the Son of God is a part of the means by which God will bring about a perfect, renewed heavens and earth where he will dwell with us forever (Rev. 21:1–8).

### Baptism, the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit Baptizer

Ultimately, this summary at the end of John 3 wraps up everything we have seen by casting light once again on Jesus himself. It is *Jesus* who comes to bring about the purification of the Holy Spirit, symbolized through water baptism. John the Baptist was the forerunner to announce the nearness of God’s mission in the world, but it is *Jesus*, the Son of God who has received all things from the Father, who executes this mission. If the activity of true ministry comes in the word and sacraments that testify to Jesus, and the motivation of ministry is humility in light of the dazzling glory of Christ, then the message of true ministry is Jesus himself.

Indeed, John writes these things so that we will believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). Whether we come as a seeker like Nicodemus or deal with the rivalry rumblings of those who are jealous of Jesus’ glory, the promise is the same: Believe on Jesus, and you will have eternal life. Otherwise, if you reject Jesus, you will not see life, but the wrath of God will remain on you. May your love for Jesus grow increasingly through faith!

### Discussion Questions

1. Why does Jesus instruct his disciples to baptize? Why does he instruct *us* to continue to baptize? What role should the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) play in our discipleship? What role do they play in your own life?
2. Why do you think the Gospel of John places such an emphasis on the subject of purification? How does the idea of purification relate to the gospel of Jesus? How often, and in what ways, do you think about the subject of purification?

3. Which idea of John the Baptist's speech in John 3:27–30 do you find most insightful? Which do you find most practical for fighting feelings of ministry envy?
4. How do you understand the wrath of God? Does your understanding of the wrath of God align with what God says about his wrath in his word?

## Notes

1. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 578.
2. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 146.
3. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 209–10.
4. “In this connection perhaps some light is cast on the remarkable statement in 4:2 that not Jesus himself but his disciples baptized: by not baptizing Jesus immediately distinguished himself from John, even while he sought to maintain continuity with his forerunner through his disciples' baptizing. But for them as well their activity as disciples of Jesus would in time not be linked with the forerunner's baptism but would rather become their baptism—mandated to them by Jesus on the basis of his universal authority—in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:16–20).” (Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 144.)
5. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 147.
6. D. A. Carson makes this point, but he also suggests that John's awareness of the chronology of the Synoptic Gospels in this aside strengthens the argument that Jesus did indeed also clear the temple at the beginning of his ministry, rather than only cleansing the temple at the end of his ministry. It seems, though, that this argument runs both ways, since if there were indeed two temple cleansings, John perhaps should have also included an aside in John 2:12–22 to clarify that this was the first of two temple cleansings. As it is, the evidence to decide between one or two temple cleansings remains inconclusive. (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 209–10.)
7. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 52.
8. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 577.
9. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 148.
10. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 210–11.
11. John Calvin rightly describes the horror of such a usurping of roles: “For as he who marries a wife does not call and invite his friends to the marriage, in order to prostitute the bride to them, or, by giving up his own rights, to allow them to partake with him of the nuptial bed, but rather that the marriage, being honored by them, may be rendered more sacred; so Christ does not call his ministers to the office of teaching, in order that, by conquering the Church, they may claim dominion over it, but that he may make use of their faithful labors for associating them with himself...The whole amounts to this, that all the eminence which teachers may possess among themselves ought not to hinder Christ from ruling alone in his Church, or from governing it alone by his word.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 134. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.vii.i.html>>)
12. “We cannot imagine that John the Baptist was ignorant of the many Old Testament passages that depict Israel or the faithful within Israel as the bride of the LORD (e.g. Is. 62:4–5; Je. 2:2; Ho. 2:16–20). Rather obliquely John is therefore also saying that the Jesus he has introduced to the faithful remnant in Israel is none other than Israel's King and Messiah. Jesus may allude to the same heritage of understanding in Mark 2:19. The Evangelist could not have been unaware of the fact that the post-resurrection church would picture Christ as

the bridegroom and his church as the bride—the continuation and transformation of the Old Testament theme (e.g. 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25–27; Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17). The joy of the ‘best man’ belongs to the Baptist, and it is now complete.” (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 211.)

13. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 147–48.

14. For the interpretive options on this verse, see Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 218–19.

15. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 294.

16. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 151.

17. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 221.