

March 27, 2011

# *Living Out The Gospel In Real Life*

## *The Increase of Joy*

John 3:22 – 36

Let's begin in verse 22: *After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.* John 3:22 Following His encounter with Nicodemus in Jerusalem, Jesus leaves the city and goes into the countryside, traveling down to the Jordan River where John records that He was hanging out with His disciples. Specifically he says that '*...He was spending time with them and baptizing.*' And if you were a casual student of the Bible you might think that Jesus was doing the baptizing. But in chapter four, John makes it clear that Jesus never baptized anyone – His disciples were doing the dunking. *Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were)* John 4:1-2

The baptism of Jesus was not with water – but as we have already read – with the Holy Spirit. What John indicates in verse 22 here is that Jesus was spending time with His disciples, no doubt teaching them about the kingdom, and people were coming to Him there and joining the entourage. And his disciples were baptizing those who wanted to demonstrate their repentance and faith. But the interesting thing is that John the Baptist himself was still baptizing people: *John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there ; and people were coming and were being baptized - for John had not yet been thrown into prison.* John 3:23-24 John was the forerunner of Jesus. He repeatedly, and again in this section of Scripture, denies that he is the Christ – the sum of his ministry was to point to the Christ. So we might well ask, 'Jesus was here, the Messiah had come, John testified to His appearance, the dove descended, the voice from heaven spoke – why was John still baptizing?'

I am not sure why John was still on the scene – he seemed to grasp his role in the plan of God – but here he was still pointing to the Messiah, still calling people to repent, and still baptizing. But one thing this did was to set up a confrontation between the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus: *Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification.* John 3:25 We are not told the details of the discussion here, but the '**therefore**' here indicates that the discussion came about because of the two baptism ministries going on at the same time. And it produced some sort of tension here because John's disciples were upset. The controversy was probably centered on whose baptism was better, John's or Jesus'.

*And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him."* John 3:26 The core of the issue becomes clear – John's disciples were jealous. They had been used to seeing great crowds in their ministry. At one point the Scriptures record that all were going to John – but now, all were going to Jesus. Just note here the use of the word 'all'. 'All' doesn't mean 'all' in the sense that everyone in the world, or even Palestine were going to see Jesus. It is 'all' in the sense that your children mean it when they want to do something and you tell them they can't and they come back with, 'Why not – everybody's doing it'? But what we have here is a classic case of ministry envy.

John's disciples were used to the attention, the fame, if you will of John's ministry. They were used to seeing great crowds and being in the limelight so to speak. But after Jesus appears on the scene, over about a six month period, attendance has dropped way off and they feel like they've been relegated to a secondary role. And they are not handling this well. How well do you handle it when it seems like everybody else is getting the attention and acclaim? Are you content with the role God has given you to play in redemptive history? John was just the set-up man, the forerunner, the guy who introduced the main act. And all through his ministry that is what he did. He knew why he was there and what he was supposed to be doing. But apparently some of his disciples didn't get the memo: '*I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord!*'

So John has to remind them of some things: *John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.* John 3:27 In other words, John is saying, 'Whatever success I have comes from God. He's the one who put me here, He's the One who has empowered me, He's the one to whom I am responsible – all I am, all I have, all I have accomplished is from God – and if it is time to get off the stage, I'll go because my work is done'. There is nothing more pathetic than the athlete who hangs around for one more season when he should retire.

**We must understand that all we have, any success in this life, any blessing we receive, comes from above.** Otherwise we are in danger of thinking more of ourselves than we ought to think. And we need to understand that we all have a part to play in redemptive history. Some have big roles, some have relatively small roles. Some of the lives of God's people blaze like a meteor in the sky, some quietly burn like a candle – but they all serve the cause of Christ and the triumph of the gospel in the world. There have been men and women like George Mueller of Bristol England, that burned steadily for ninety years serving his congregation and orphans in England and then serving the world in missions for nearly twenty years after that. There have also been men and women like Robert Murray McCheyne whose light was brief but brilliant and left a legacy for all succeeding generations. But the point of our lives is not ourselves – but rather to point to Christ. We exist to make much of Him in the world in the time we are allotted here on earth, and to focus on anything else is to point to us and not to Him.

John's testimony highlighted this fact: "*You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.'*" John 3:28 We are too prone to follow a man. **The mark of any great ministry is not how many follow the man, but how many follow Jesus.** John felt that the success of his ministry was based not on the number of people that came to him, but the number of people that left him to follow Jesus. Anytime you see a ministry where people are devoted to the man, watch out – there is something wrong there. I am not saying that we don't enjoy certain ministries and support certain preachers of the gospel, but whenever the man is bigger than the message, there is a root of evil that will eventually blossom and bear really bad fruit. John is reminding his disciples of the message – ***'I am not the Christ, don't follow me, follow Him'***. In other words, 'How can you be jealous when my ministry is doing exactly what it was supposed to – turn people to Jesus? You should be happy about that!'

And then John goes on to explain why a dwindling ministry was a cause for joy, not jealousy: "*He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full.*" John 3:29 The only way John could get across his sense of increasing joy in the face of decreasing popularity was to give his disciples the picture of a wedding party. Essentially John says that in this cosmic wedding party, he is the best man. And in weddings of that time, the best man was called the friend of the bridegroom. His main job as the friend of the bridegroom was to take the hand of the bride and put it in the bridegroom's hand – and that ended the ceremony. When the best man put their hands together, his job was done.

Furthermore, John says that his joy was great because he finally heard the bridegroom's voice. The bridegroom, in these weddings, couldn't speak until he had received the hand of the bride from the friend of the bridegroom – and when he spoke that signified the union of bride and bridegroom. And John says, 'I put their hands together, I heard the bridegroom speak, my joy is full, I'm outa here.' How could John be sad, or unhappy? His ministry was complete, he called people to repentance, he pointed them to Jesus, and they were going to Him, apparently in large numbers. That is cause for joy, not sorrow. The best man did his work well. There is no greater joy than that of a job well done.

And then John points out the path of increasing joy: "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*" John 3:30 **The Christian life is one of divine paradox** – we see these throughout Scripture: *He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.* John 12:25 A paradox is a statement of truth that links apparently contradicting ideas – if you love your life you lose it – if you hate your life you keep it. Or this one: *So the last shall be first, and the first last* Matthew 20:16. Or this one: *for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great.* Luke 9:48 Or this one: *He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed.* Luke 1:52-53

The path to joy according to this world is not by decreasing but increasing. People pursue increasing their financial worth as a means to joy – or they work to increase their power, or prestige, or fame, or skill – all as a means to some sort of goal of eventually happiness and satisfaction. But John says that the means to joy is for Christ to increase and for us to decrease. That is a paradox. What increased John's joy was to see the multitudes come to Christ and to see his own ministry grow smaller. The path to increased joy is to make much of Christ in the world, to see His kingdom prosper, His star shine. If our star is shining, how will people see the light of Christ? If we really want to increase – the word means to grow, to increase, become greater – we must first begin by decreasing – to make less of us. **'He must increase and I must decrease' means to be less and less occupied with ourselves and more and more occupied with Christ.** And the more we are occupied with Him, the less we will be occupied with ourselves and the more our joy will overflow.

If our joy is tied to our increase – whatever that looks like, then when it fails to increase, we experience a corresponding decrease in joy. If John's joy was tied to his increasing ministry – he would have been profoundly depressed by the end. Everyone was leaving – nobody was sticking around – even his own disciples were deserting him for Jesus. But John's joy was not tied to his increase. Paradoxically, John's joy increased as his ministry decreased. It reminds me of a sign that used to be posted on some pulpits in Scotland: **'No man can give at once the impression that he is clever and that Christ is mighty to save'. The increase of joy is directly related to the decrease of self.** If you are living for yourself – don't expect increasing joy. If you are chasing stuff trying to fill your needs – don't expect increasing joy. The message of the cross is death to self and life to Christ. When Jesus went to the cross, Hebrews tells us that He endured the cross for the joy set before Him. In other words, His decrease on the cross, meant eternal increase in joy.

We have gotten the idea in this day that coming to Christ is all about filling up our emptiness – and that is true to some extent – but that is not the foremost truth of the gospel. Coming to Christ is all about making much of Him because He is worthy to be worshipped and adored – He is worthy to give our lives away in His service – He is worthy to claim ownership of all our living. When William Carey, the Father of missions, was dying, he turned to a friend and said, **'When I'm gone, don't talk about William Carey, talk about William Carey's Savior. I desire that Christ alone be magnified'.**

John goes on to tell us why Jesus is worthy. First of all **He is from heaven:** *"He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all.* John 3:31 Only someone who is from heaven, who is above all, is worthy of our worship, and that is Jesus. It isn't John, even though Jesus said that *'...among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist...'* Matthew 11:11 John is not from heaven he is from the earth.

Secondly John says that **Jesus is the eternal witness:** *"What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies ; and no one receives his testimony.* John 3:32 The first part of that verse refers to Christ, the second he refers to John the Baptist, just as in the preceding verse. Christ was there in the beginning, He made it all, He saw it all, His testimony is pure truth from the throne of God – John's testimony is secondhand. And we shouldn't understand from this that no one received John's testimony. **'No one'** here is used in the same sense as 'all' was used in the earlier part of this text. It is a general exclusive, not a total exclusive. And we know generally that the Jews as a whole did not accept John's testimony – so he says **'no one'**.

Thirdly, **the testimony of Jesus agrees with God.** *"He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true.* John 3:33 Or to say it another way, whoever received the testimony of Jesus confirms the fact that God is true – because the Son and the Father are one – they both agree. And it is at this point that many people refuse to believe. How many times have you heard someone say, 'Oh I believe in God – I'm just not sure about Jesus'. They are willing to concede that there is a God, but they won't have anything to do with His Son. God the Creator as a distant reality is fine – but it gets rather up close and personal to talk about His Son the Savior.

Fourthly, **Christ came with the full, unlimited power of the Holy Spirit.** *"For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God ; for He gives the Spirit without measure.* John 3:34 We need to read this verse ignoring the semi-colon here. Other wise we might take this to mean that the giving of the Holy Spirit without measure is speaking of Jesus doing the giving. But the Greek here makes it plain that it is God – the One who sent the Son doing the giving – and God gave the Spirit without measure to Christ. This is crucial to our understanding that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man. He was unlike John the Baptist who was filled with the Holy Spirit, but it was limited filling – not full measure. The Holy Spirit operates in us in a limited way because of our sinful nature – we are not divine. But Christ is fully divine and fully human.

Finally, Christ is worthy of our worship because **He controls all things:** *"The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.* John 3:35 Here John uses **'all'** in the total exclusive sense – in other words, the fact that the Father has given all things into His hands means all things, period. As Abraham Kuyper once said: **"In the total expanse of human life there is not a single square inch of which Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not declare, 'That is mine!'"** That alone should fill our hearts with wonder and worship. That alone should be the fountainhead of increasing joy. If my Lord is in control of all things – if He is in control of all things in my life – then I can trust Him in all the experiences of life. I can trust Him when the sun is shining – I can trust Him when it is hidden by the clouds – I can trust Him to always do right by me – even when the circumstances dictate a different response and the situation looks bad.

Most of you know who Joni Eareckson Tada is. You probably know that when she was a teenager, she dove in the water a whole and healthy girl, and came out a quadriplegic. She has lived her life in constant pain and with all the difficulties that surround someone who cannot walk, or dress themselves or feed themselves or do the tiniest normal everyday activity without help. But that 'accident' instead of diminishing her joy, actually increased it. She writes: ***"In the Psalms we're told that God does not deal with us according to our sins and iniquities. My accident was not a punishment for my wrongdoing--whether or not I deserved it. Only God knows why I was paralyzed. Maybe He knew I'd be ultimately happier serving Him. If I were still on my feet, it's hard to say how things might have gone. I probably would have drifted through life--marriage, maybe even divorce--dissatisfied and disillusioned. When I was in high school, I reacted to life selfishly and never built on any long lasting values. I lived simply for each day and the pleasure I wanted--and almost always at the expense of others."*** ***Mere happiness depends on circumstances – real joy depends on Christ and who He is.***

And then John the Baptist closes his last sermon with a **call to increasing joy**: *"He who believes in the Son has eternal life ; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."* John 3:36 He doesn't say that eternal life equals eternal joy – but that goes without saying. If we know anything about heaven, it is a place of increasing joy; first of all because it is forever, and then because God is infinite and there is no limit to His joy. But he does make a point of saying that those who don't believe in the Son won't have joy – all they can expect is wrath. Here he contrasts the one who believes with the one who disobeys – and we are to infer from this that obedience to the Son is the obedience to believe in the Son – the obedience of faith. And when someone does not believe he is in disobedience. So if you are here this morning and you do not believe in the Son of God, you are not neutral, you are not, as some describe their condition, sitting on the fence – you are actually in active, willful disobedience to God – which is why the wrath of God is not removed but sitting on you even now.

Most people believe that we have to be bad people to deserve God's wrath. That isn't what the Bible teaches. The wrath of God is already hanging over us. There's an old story about Dionysius of Syracuse, a Greek tyrant. He had a servant by the name of Damocles, and he kept talking all the time about how kings were happy and how kings were fortunate and how kings were blessed and how nice it was to be a king. Until finally Dionysius decided that Damocles needed a lesson, so he invited him to a big banquet. So the banquet night came and he was ushered to the king's chair at the head of the table. And he was told to sit there, and then he looked up and he was horrified to see that there was a great heavy sharp sword hanging right above his head literally by a thread. That's the picture when people speak of "The sword of Damocles." **It's a figure of speech for impending judgment.**

This is the situation of everyone without Christ . They are under the sword of judgment, under the curse, sitting under the wrath of God. But the gospel says Christ has redeemed us out from the curse by becoming a curse. Now the Greek preposition is rather significant, it really means literally **over** us. So here we are under the sword of judgment, but Jesus Christ has come in over us by being made a curse for us so that the sword falls upon him and we are delivered out from the curse of the law. The invitation of the gospel is a call to increasing joy. First of all because when we believe and receive Christ interposes Himself between us and wrath of God. We deserved to die but the sword fell on Him. That is joy – no longer under the sword! It is also a call to eternal, increasing joy. *'These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.'* John 15:11

*Our gracious God and loving Father,*

*We thank You for the promise of increasing, eternal joy in Christ. We stand undone in Your presence as those who deserved the sword yet rescued by Your grace. Your Son bore all the pain that we might have all joy, He wept that all tears might be wiped from our eyes, He groaned in agony that we might sing in triumph, He wore the thorns that we might wear a crown, He bowed His head that ours might be lifted in wonder and awe. Grant us the assurance that in Christ we died, in Him we rose, in His life we live, in His victory we triumph, in His ascension we will be glorified. Help us to worship and adore You with our lips and with our lives. Grant that we would make much of You and nothing of ourselves so that we might delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the joy-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*