



Sunday, November 9, 2025

John 3:22-36

We're now officially just over two months into the book of John, and one of the interesting things we've seen so far is how intentional John is about developing the theme of Jesus as sovereign. This is absolutely key for him. Over the past few weeks, we've watched that theme unfold - from the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine, to the temple, where He declared authority over His Father's house, and then to His late-night conversation with Nicodemus, where He revealed what it truly means to be born again.

As we mentioned last week, none of these stories are in sequential or chronological order, but that doesn't matter for John, because his goal isn't to give us a timeline - it's to give us theology. Every story is chosen intentionally - first to hint at Jesus' sovereignty, then to declare it, and finally to explain it. And now that John has firmly established Jesus' sovereignty, that truth becomes the very foundation for everything else we're about to see as we continue through his Gospel.

So with that in mind, if you have your Bibles with you this morning, I'd like to invite you to turn with me to John 3:22-36. If you are able to, please stand for the reading of the Word of the Lord:

John 3:22-36

'After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. 23 Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. 24 For John had not yet been thrown into prison.

25 Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. 26 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!"

27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent

before Him.’ 29 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. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease. 31 He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. 33 He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. 34 For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. 35 The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. 36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

This section is quite significant because it’s the first time we see both John’s and Jesus’ baptisms happening simultaneously.

But if you remember, John’s baptism was preparatory and focused on repentance - ultimately pointing people toward the Messiah, Jesus, the only One who could bring salvation.

And we know from the first two chapters that John the Baptist was very clear about this. He told everyone who came to him, ‘I’m not the Messiah - I’m simply preparing the way for Him.’

So while John’s baptism prepared hearts for salvation, Jesus’ baptism represented the new life that salvation brings.

And by this point, Jesus had already commissioned His disciples to baptize under His authority - which means His ministry was gaining both visibility and momentum.

Meanwhile, John was still baptizing at a place called Aenon near Salim - about a day’s journey north of where Jesus and His disciples were ministering. Close enough that word was spreading quickly.

And that’s when the tension starts to build.

At first, it’s subtle - a dispute breaks out between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jewish man about purification. We’re not told exactly what the argument was about, but soon after, that tension shifts toward Jesus’ growing ministry.

It seems that whatever that initial disagreement was, it stirred a comparison: John’s disciples were watching Jesus’ influence rise while their own ministry began to fade. And you can almost feel the frustration and insecurity start to surface.

So they come to John - desperate, anxious - and say, 'Rabbi, that man who was with you across the Jordan, the one you testified about... everyone's going to him now!'

Their jealousy is clear. Their identity has been wrapped up in the success and growth of their ministry, and now that it's slipping away, they don't know what to do because they don't know who they are.

And John - in perfect humility - responds by reminding them of the bigger picture.

He uses an image that would've been instantly familiar to them: a wedding. And this imagery is beautiful because it shows the difference between Jesus and John and how there was never any competition between them.

John goes on to say that Jesus is the groom and he is in essence the best-man. He has no claim on the bride for the bride clearly belongs to the groom and he to her. His role then, as best man has nothing to do with the bride, but everything to do with the groom. He is there to support the groom. To serve the groom. To make sure all the preparation is done in order for things to move smoothly for the groom before he starts down the aisle.

Now, I'm not sure if there are any Office fans here this morning... but if you are, you probably remember the scene where Michael Scott - who's the boss of Jim and Pam - shows up at their wedding and somehow manages to make it all about himself.

It's painful to watch! And it's such a great reminder of how important it is to know your role - because when you forget who the story is really about, you end up stealing joy instead of sharing in it.

So John turns to his disciples and shows them that instead of resenting what's happening, they should be rejoicing in it. Because this - people turning to Jesus - means that their ministry is actually working. Their whole purpose was to prepare the way for Him, and now that it's happening, they should be rejoicing not complaining.

And it's in that moment - in the middle of their complaining and jealousy - that John speaks one last time with incredible humility and clarity.

And keep in mind that these are the final recorded words of John the Baptist in Scripture - his closing lines before the spotlight shifts entirely to Jesus. John reminds them that:

‘He must increase, but I must decrease.’

It’s a simple line, but it’s also one of the most powerful confessions in all of Scripture. In that very moment, John recognizes that his purpose is being fulfilled. The crowds may be smaller, the attention may be fading, but the Kingdom of God is advancing - and that’s the point. For John, it’s all about Jesus and it’s all about the Kingdom moving forward.

In just a few short months, John will find himself imprisoned and then executed. So everything he’s doing now, is in part, to set up his disciples to have the same heart posture as him - so that the Kingdom of God - not the Kingdom of John - can keep advancing.

Now, although the Gospel of John does not record his imprisonment, both Matthew and Luke do and in them both we learn that while in prison, John sends word to Jesus saying:

Luke 7:20b

‘Are you the One who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’

This question has been wrestled with for centuries because it shows a side of John we’ve never seen before. It seems to suggest that in prison, John’s confidence is tested, and an honest tension between faith and frustration begins to surface.

There are two main ways to read this line:

On one hand, it could be genuine uncertainty - a man who’s given everything for the Kingdom and now just wants to know if he got it right.

But on the other hand - and this is where I tend to lean - it might be more of a rhetorical question, born out of frustration and longing shaped by unmet expectations.

Kind of like what we saw back at the wedding in Cana when Jesus’ mother came to Him and said, ‘They’ve run out of wine’? This wasn’t just an observation. It was control, veiled as motherly motivation. She was really saying, ‘Alright Jesus, it’s time. Do something.’ Jesus’ response was firm yet loving, because He would not be controlled by anyone but God the Father.

And it seems to me that John may be doing something similar here.

Think about it, he’s sitting in prison - alone, waiting - and he’s given up everything for the sake of

the Messiah. He knows that Jesus is the Messiah, there is no doubt about that. But there's a growing sense of frustration.

Because when John preached about the coming Messiah, he pictured a Messiah who would come in judgment. He said,

Matthew 3:10a/12b

'And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees...and (He will) gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

John expected Jesus to come with wrath and fire - to cleanse the world, to bring justice, to set things right. John expected a closed fist but he got an open hand instead and instead of judgment, John sees mercy. Instead of wrath, he sees restoration.

Jesus still isn't storming Jerusalem, still isn't riding in on a white horse, still isn't bringing judgment or overthrowing Rome. He's still out walking the hills, preaching and teaching, bringing healing and miracles where needed and while John knows that this is good, it's not what he has expected.

So this isn't disbelief; it's disappointment - rooted not in who Jesus is, but in how He chooses to operate His Kingdom.

If you read the line with that in mind, you can almost hear the tone - a little bit of rhetorical edge, almost a plea: 'Jesus, if You really are the One... then why are You waiting? Why am I still in this cell while You're out wandering the hills? Do something already.'

It's the cry of someone who knows exactly who Jesus is - but is struggling to understand what He's doing.

And Jesus senses this. His response to John - recorded in both Matthew and Luke - is gentle but sovereign:

Matthew 11:4-5

'Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: 5 The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.'

In essence, it's as if Jesus was saying, 'Yes, John - I am the One. But the Kingdom isn't coming the way you thought it would. It's not coming with fire and judgment - at least, not yet. It's coming first with mercy and grace.'

And then Jesus says something profound - but shocking:

Luke 7:28

'28 For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.'

So follow the progression here.

Jesus explains what He's doing and reveals to John that even though it doesn't look like it - as the Messiah - He is doing exactly what needs to be done to Bring His Kingdom to Earth.

And then it seems like Jesus builds him up, just to tear him down by telling him that he's the greatest prophet and yet, also the least in the kingdom. Like, you're amazing but you're really not. Sorry bud.

And at first, it looks like Jesus is diminishing John but keep in mind that this is all in response to John's subtle attempt to motivate Jesus to get a move on. But instead of rebuking John, Jesus responds with incredible grace.

He doesn't say, 'John, you have no idea what you're talking about.'

He essentially says, 'John, I understand your comment because you just can't see everything from where you're standing.'

So, by using the phrase 'the Kingdom of God,' Jesus is drawing attention to the difference in their vantage points. John's perspective is entirely pre-cross. He has no frame of reference for what life in the Kingdom of God will look like after the cross.

So while John is calling for Jesus to bring judgment and ease off the mercy, what he doesn't realize is that judgment is coming - but not the way that John envisioned. It's not going to fall on Rome or Greece, but on Jesus Himself.

And that's what makes Jesus' response so beautiful.

Rather than calling John out, He lifts him up with truth and grace by gently reminding him - and

everyone listening - that those living after the cross will see with far greater clarity what John could only glimpse from afar.

So greater in this sense is not better, it's simply clearer.

And listen, it's not just John who wrestled with this kind of clarity problem.

Many in Jesus' day did - even some of His own disciples.

They also wanted Him to start throwing lightning bolts and fireballs - to bring judgment, to overthrow Rome, to make everything right now.

But Jesus didn't come that way.

He came with mercy first, not judgment.

He came to change hearts before He changed actions.

And that confused people then - just like it can confuse us now.

Because let's be honest - we want a Jesus who moves fast, who fixes everything quickly, who proves Himself on our timeline and our expectation.

But as Jesus would later display, the Kingdom doesn't come by force; it comes through surrender.

And I think that's what John had to learn - and what we still have to learn.

That's why his final words matter so deeply: He must increase, but I must decrease.

Points to consider:

John knew his role. He was the best man; Jesus was the groom. His job wasn't to draw attention to himself, but to make sure the focus stayed on the groom. We often forget that. We tend to think we're the main character in our own story - that life revolves around us. But what John shows us is that even though our story involves us, it's not about us. It's about Jesus. When He becomes the main character in the story of our lives then everything shifts. Our successes point to His glory. Our humility becomes joy.

And if there's something in our lives that humbles us but exalts Christ - we can embrace it with joy, because that's what we're made for: to glorify God and build His Kingdom here on earth. That's why John could decrease - because he knew his role, and he rejoiced in it.

John didn't always get it right - and neither will we. There was a disconnect between what John expected Jesus to do and what Jesus actually did. John wanted judgment; Jesus brought mercy. Sometimes we wrestle with the same tension. We have expectations of what we think Jesus should do - how He should move, when He should act, what victory should look like. But often, our expectations are rooted more in our own understanding of Jesus than in who He really is. And if that's the case, then when Jesus doesn't do what we think He should, that doesn't mean He's wrong - it just means that we might need to realign our expectations. Our response, like John's, must be humility and surrender. We trust who He is, even when we don't understand what He's doing. Because true faith doesn't demand control; it yields to His Lordship.

He must increase, but I must decrease. This isn't just John's declaration - it's the invitation for every disciple of Jesus. Decreasing doesn't mean disappearing; it means making space for Jesus to reign in every area of our lives. It means letting His will shape our desires, His mercy soften our judgments, and His presence lead our actions. The more He increases, the more we become who we were meant to be. That's the paradox of the Kingdom: when we surrender control, we actually find freedom. So maybe the question we all need to ask today is simple - where does Jesus need to increase in me? In my pride? My plans? My relationships? My expectations? Whatever it is, let Him rise higher - and let us gladly take the lower place, because the lower we go, the clearer He becomes.

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