



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 3: 22-36

Winter 2021-22

"Humility And Eternity"

TRANSCRIPT

Good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Gospel of John and this morning we're in chapter 3, one of the magisterial chapters of the Bible, and we're going to finish it up this morning. We're going to look at chapter 3, verses 22 through 36,

²² After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.

[Now you'll notice across the page in chapter 4, verse 2, it speaks of baptizing as well. But then John has this parenthetical statement, ("...although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were"). It doesn't say why Jesus wasn't baptizing but I suspect that it had to do with His knowledge that it would be good for people to not think, 'Well, I was baptized by the Lord Jesus.' That would really set someone apart. But He wasn't doing it and I assume that was the case in our verse 22, that His disciples were actually doing it. Now verse 23,]

²³ John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and *people* were coming and were being baptized— ²⁴ for John had not yet been thrown into prison.

²⁵ Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew 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 him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of 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. So this joy of mine has been made full. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease.

³¹ "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. ³² What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ 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 3:22-36

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word.

(Message) It was a Puritan who said, "Pride is a sinner's torment, but humility is a saint's ornament." That's good. The problem is, too few saints wear it. And so, when we come to John chapter 3, verse 30, and we hear some of the last words of John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease," we are impressed with John's humility— because it's rare. But it's right.

This is a great passage on, the way to live happily. But also on the way to live eternally because the chapter ends on that hope, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life." (vs36a). Now that's the refrain that runs throughout this great chapter. It's given in verse 16; it's reinforced in the next verse, verse 17, where John stated that 'Jesus wasn't sent into the world to judge the world, but to save the world.'

And yet judgment is a reality. The chapter ends with the sobering words, "He who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (vs36b). And you'll notice, "abides *presently* on him."

The disobedient life is the unbelieving life, a self-centered and hard life, the unsatisfied life under wrath. It's the opposite of John's life, who humbled himself to obey God and was content and happy.

But John had a demanding life. And to grasp it and learn from him we need to know the setting of the events of the chapter. John was an immensely popular person among the Jewish people of his day. Both Matthew and Luke tell of the multitudes that went down to the Jordan River to hear him preach and to be baptized by him.

John was a phenomenon, the first prophet in Israel since Malachi. After 400 years of silence a prophetic voice was again heard in the land. Some even thought he was the reincarnation of Elijah; others maybe the Messiah Himself. And people came from all over to hear him preach—all classes of people from the privileged to the poor.

Charles Spurgeon had that kind of ministry in London. Thousands came every Sunday from all walks of life. William Gladstone, the Prime Minister visited the Metropolitan Tabernacle to hear him preach. Even Queen Victoria supposedly visited in disguise.

Well John too, attracted royalty to his preaching. Mark states that, at the beginning of his ministry King Herod would hear him preach and enjoyed listening to him. John was a fearless preacher; and his ministry ended when he bravely exposed the scandalous life of Herod, who then had him arrested and imprisoned.

But before that, public interest was beginning to shift from John to another preacher, to the Lord. And that's the subject of much of this passage—the change and its effect on John and his disciples. The passage begins with Jesus and His disciples leaving Jerusalem. He had an important visit there: He had cleansed the temple; He'd done miracles; and one night He talked to Nicodemus. But now He has left the city to go out

into Judea, into the countryside, where He spent time with His disciples and began to baptize people who were coming to Him and to listen to Him.

So the two ministries of Jesus and John overlapped—and the crowds around the Lord began to grow. It was at that time that a Jew came to the disciples of John and engaged them in a theological discussion on the subject of purification. Ceremonial washings became very important to the Jewish life at this time. Some groups would bathe daily, and not so much for hygiene as for religious purposes, for ritual cleansing. It became very important to them spiritually, religiously.

And so there's a discussion here between John's disciples and this individual Jewish man, evidently about the relationship between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus; and that of the tradition of purification; these traditional rites that the Jews had and their washings. Well, they don't go into that, at least we're not told about that discussion, but evidently it was through this conversation they were having that John's disciples became aware of Jesus' increasing popularity and how the crowds were beginning to go over to Him.

They had seen it already when some of the Baptist's disciples left to follow Jesus. Andrew was one—and the apostle John was another. But now they learned the crowds were shifting to Him, to Jesus, and it disturbed these disciples of John. So they went to him, they went to John with the report, and they said in verse 26, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him."

It's been said that success has made failures of many men. That's true. Celebrity is often a curse. And these disciples suffered from some of that. They hadn't truly, completely understood John's success, the reason for it. And they were complaining about Jesus' growing public popularity. They saw that it was at the expense of John's ministry—and they were jealous. And their complaint became a test for John. It became an opportunity for him to also take things personally and become resentful toward the Lord. That would have been the common response, I think.

But it wasn't John's response—far from it, his answer in verse 27 explains why. He understood God's sovereignty, he understood God's grace in all matters of life. "A man", he said, "can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven."

If John enjoyed great success, then that was purely a gift of God. If Jesus was now enjoying great success, then that too, was altogether of God. And so, there's no reason for bitterness—that's reason for joy! This is God's work, this is God's will; he understood that. He understood the sovereignty of God; and that kept John humble and happy. —The two go together.

We see the same understanding in Paul when in 1 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 7, he corrected the Corinthians pride with the reminder that everything they had, everything, was a gift of God. "Who regards you as superior?" he asked them. Well, they did, for one thing. He knew that. It's really a rhetorical question. "Who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive?" And the answer to that, of course is—Nothing! And since it's been received, since it is all a gift, there's nothing to boast about.

We can understand that broadly because everything ultimately comes down from God; either directly or indirectly. Not only achievements, but the ability to produce them—and that includes everyone. 'A man cannot receive anything except it comes down from the LORD', John said. That includes everyone, so we can understand this very broadly. Everything we produce, everything that we do, is a product of God's grace and mercy. The very ability that we have, the very physical energy we have, comes from Him altogether.

Lots of discoveries have been made by accident. The ancient Greek mathematician, Archimedes, made one when he stepped into a tub of water to take a bath. Suddenly he 'Saw it all'!, (whatever he was thinking about). He said, "Eureka!", (I have found it!). Isaac Newton was sitting under a tree when he saw an apple fall and discovered gravity. People call these 'accidents' or they called them 'luck', but in fact they are all providence. The hand of God is in all of it. It's in everything.

Now those examples that I just gave may be legends, I don't know. But many aren't and they serve to illustrate that the divine hidden Hand guides events and is the source of great gifts in the common grace that God gives to all mankind. We are indebted to the LORD for everything. The air we breathe, the harvest that we reap—*everything*. And Christians have the greatest debt for faith and understanding. And for new life now, and heaven to come. We are debtors to mercy alone.

John understood that. He was no shabby theologian. And he was saying here, 'It's all been received because it's all been given.' The ministry is God's to give, to reduce and direct, by His wisdom. Praise God!

And I'll say this, all of us have a ministry. Every one of you has been called into the family of God and equipped with a gift and a ministry. God gives some saints large ministries according to the gifts that He's given. He gives others small ministries. We're to do what we've been given to do and thank God for the opportunity to do anything in His service.

But John not only knew theology and God's sovereignty, he knew himself. In verse 28a he reminded his disciples of who he was, "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ.' " It's important to know who and what we are—and are not. Even the Greeks understood that. At Delphi, their sacred site, they inscribed on the temple of Apollo the words, "Know Thyself". A person is wise to do that.

John did. He knew himself. He knew who he was. 'He was just a voice in the wilderness, sent ahead of Him', he said; sent ahead of the Christ. And to illustrate that he compared himself in verse 29 to the best man in a wedding, who is called "the friend of the bridegroom."

In ancient times the friend had a large responsibility. It was his job to organize the details of the wedding and to bring the bride to the bridegroom. When that was done and the bridegroom was present, and 'his voice was heard', John says, and they were together, the friend's job, (as the best man in bringing the two together and arranging everything), was done. He'd finished his task.

And so John said, "he rejoices greatly." It's a success. The task is completed. The bridegroom would then become the central figure with the bride and the friend would then fade away.

That was John. So he said, "This joy of mine has been made full." (vs29c). He didn't suffer from envy or jealousy because he knew himself. He knew what he was and who Jesus was. His choice of describing Jesus as the bridegroom made that plain. He knew exactly who Christ was. The Old Testament pictured Israel as God's bride. Most notably we find that in the Book of Hosea. John knew he brought the nation to its bridegroom—to its Lord and God.

So he had no sense of rivalry, only humble gratitude that he had the opportunity to serve the Lord in this very important ministry that was given to him. And he did that; he did it faithfully. And having done it faithfully, having accomplished the purpose, he stepped aside—because his preaching ministry and all that he'd done had accomplished God's will.

The final words that John spoke in this fourth Gospel show the greatness of his heart and righteous spirit when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." That exemplifies the attitude that each of us as Christians should have, which is selflessness, humility, being happy to see success in others and happy to see them prosper. That's not natural, not natural in the fallen individual. But it's right; and it's certainly right for a believer.

Early in George Müller's ministry...[and Müller as you probably know, was famous for the orphanages that he started in England—and then really beyond. And his ministry was a faith ministry, much like Hudson Taylor's ministry in China, ('Faith Ministry' meaning he didn't seek funds from anyone. They simply prayed and the LORD provided.) And that's how he conducted his ministry; and that's one of the great testimonies of Müller's life, a man of great faith.]...but we see his great faith early in his life.

He had a colleague named Henry Krake, a man Müller was drawn to because, as Müller wrote, "Because of his warmth toward the LORD." It's a very godly man that he

was connected with and they ministered together in the church. Mr. Krake was a very good preacher. And some time after Müller's friend died, he wrote about him. He wrote, "When in the year 1832 I saw how some preferred my beloved friend's ministry to mine, I determined, in the strength of God, to rejoice in this instead of envying him." That's real greatness.

That was John the Baptist. "He must increase, but I must decrease." I can imagine that, as John the apostle wrote those words he thought, 'I'm going to stop there. I won't record John's death but I will record what ought to be considered his epitaph: "He must increase, but I must decrease." '

This is what we should remember about John; that he was humble and happy. He loved the LORD because he did. He served God, not self. And in doing that he served people, all those around him—and rejoiced in decreasing.

It's hard for us to imagine that humility is the path to happiness. Humility goes contrary to our natural bent, which is to exalt self. But it's selflessness that is the way to contentment and joy. Now I say that's not natural; that's counter intuitive, contrary to our nature—which is to seek our own way, to seek our own glory.

But this is God's way, and we see it here and in the apostle Paul. That's his counsel that he gave to the Philippians in the first half of Philippians chapter 2. Humility, selflessness, fosters unity. It keeps peace. It's what pleases God—and it is the life that He blesses.

But we do it the way Müller did; he *determined* to do it. He resolved that this was the attitude that he would take because he knew that it was right—and he sought God's power to do it. He did it, as he said, "in the strength of God". And in saying that he was making a statement of humility. He was saying in effect, 'I'm going to do this. But it's not in my own strength because in my own strength I can do nothing but exalt myself and be jealous and envious. But I determined to do what is pleasing to God in His strength.'

And that's how we do what we're to do in this life. It's really the only way we can do anything that pleases Him: Lean on the LORD and trust in Him; and follow Him in obedience.

But more important than John's humility is what inspired it. John knew something far greater and more important was happening than any expansion of his own ministry and reputation. And the apostle explains that in verses 31 and 32 where he reflects on John's statement and explains why Jesus *must* increase; it's the "*must*" of divine necessity. John knew that this was God's will. It was God's plan of salvation, which he had hoped for and saw unfolding before his eyes—and he rejoiced in that. The Savior he announced had come—and that too, is the reason Jesus *must* increase.

John the apostle describes Him in verse 31 as being "from above." Jesus is God, God the Son. Therefore He is above all—He must be first. It is His rightful place. We are His creatures; He is our creator. John the Baptist knew that. He knew who he himself was—that he was just a creature and he knew that all the glory rightfully is to God. It's His glory and he was glad to see the Lord exalted, glorified.

And the Lord's ministry only confirmed that because He is "from above", as John said. Jesus spoke differently from those who are "from the earth"—differently from John the Baptist. Jesus spoke of things that only He knew of, things that only He could reveal. John could tell people to repent and to be baptized as the sign of their repentance—but Jesus could speak of heaven, of what it is and the way to it. No man on earth can reveal heavenly things.

The skeptic, H. L. Mencken said, "A philosopher is a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there. A theologian is the man who finds it." Well now, as I said, he's a skeptic. He was a skeptic back in the 1920s through the '30s and '40s—but what he means by that is theologians believe in things that aren't there. And that's true of those who are "of the earth and speak of the earth", (vs31), whether it's a

theologian, (and there are plenty of bad ones), or a philosopher, or a journalist like H. L. Mencken. They're ignorant of spiritual things.

But Christ is not. He "comes from above", (vs31), and reveals things that only He can know. And we take it by faith; we believe it by faith. We, by faith, understand what we understand. He had firsthand knowledge. He could speak with authority of heaven and how to enter it. He came into this world like Light into a dark room. And shines in that room and reveals the nature of it and the nature of things; the nature of this world that it is in its fallen condition, wrecked and ruined. But He has the solution, He has the remedy.

Now that's not finding a black cat that isn't there. —That's divine revelation. And so John wrote, in verse 32, "What He has seen and heard, of Him he testifies;..." He testified with authority, the Lord Jesus. He testified with the authority of God. But then John adds, "...no one receives His testimony."

Nicodemus didn't, not initially. We hope, I think, he did later; but initially he didn't. And Jesus told him that. Jesus said, "and you do not accept our testimony." (vs11) It went against all that he had been taught, all that he taught, all that he believed. And so it is with the world generally; they do not receive the Lord's testimony.

But by grace, there are some exceptions. And there are many exceptions. John goes on to say, in verse 33, that the one who received Christ's "testimony has set his seal on *this*, that God is true." Now that happens at conversion when a person believes. Like some king in the past who would stamp his seal of wax on a document that guaranteed the truth of it, the accuracy of it, —every person who believes in Jesus Christ, by his or her faith, affirms that of the Lord God: Affirms "that God is true."

Now we might have expected John to say, 'that Jesus is true'. But since Jesus' words are so completely God's words and that He was with God and was God, believing in Christ is believing in God. He speaks truth, the very words of God. Not only because He came from heaven but also, because in His humanity, God gave Him "the Holy Spirit without measure." That's what he says in verse 34. So He spoke from the Spirit by the

Spirit. As a result, His words were always consistent with the mind and the will of the Father. So they're absolutely reliable. The Word of God is absolutely reliable. It is God's Word, through man, to us. And it is infallible—and without error.

Another reason Christ is to be believed, not only because of His divine authority, His divine origin, and because He has the Spirit, but the other reason is given in verse 35. He has great authority, divine authority because the Father, “has given all things into His hand.” Later in chapter 5, Jesus said that He had authority to ‘give life to whomever he wishes’, (vs21), and authority ‘to judge the world’. (vs22). Obviously then, a person's response to Christ is very serious; it has consequences. Wonderful consequences—or the response may result in terrible consequences.

And that's where John concludes the third chapter, (perhaps I should say that's where the third chapter concludes, because John didn't mark out, number the verses or the chapter divisions), but this is where our chapter ends with that very truth. That statement that he makes here in verse 36, the importance of one's response to the Lord Jesus Christ. The one, “who believes in the Son”, John said, “has eternal life.”

Quite a blessing, eternal life. We can spend the rest of the hour, (which is about up), that we could spend whole hours on that very subject, eternal life. Life without end; Life in the age to come; Life and glory. This present existence is temporary and brief—we are just a vapor. The day will come when we will all depart this world unless the Lord comes before. But we're ‘just a vapor’, James said. (4:14). —But what is to come is not: It is forever. World without end. That's our hope—and that is real.

But eternal life doesn't begin at death but at the moment of faith. Glorification is later—but forgiveness is now. And the power to live obediently, daily in our lives is through the gift of the Holy Spirit that we possess.

Now the Lord will have much more to say about that when we come to chapter 14 and the ministry of the Spirit. But it's hinted at all through this Gospel leading up to

that. We have the Spirit of God to enable us to do the very thing we should do; in His power we live obediently.

Well that's the new life that we have through faith, now and forever. But only through faith; faith alone in Christ alone. And that's the emphasis here and that's the stress throughout this chapter—making it a fitting ending to the chapter.

But the opposite is also true. It only follows that since faith in God's Son is the only way to have eternal life, then not believing in Him, disbelief, results in eternal death. That's what John says, "...but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (36b). Now we might have expected John to say, 'He who does not *believe* in the Son'. But instead he wrote, "does not *obey* the Son."

But the point John was making is, 'Faith involves obedience.' Paul wrote of "the obedience of faith" in Romans chapter 1, verse 5, because faith in Christ is not optional. It is a command to turn from sin and come to the Savior. Believing is obeying God. Those who do not believe leave themselves exposed to the wrath of God; not in the future only, not at the judgment day only, but presently. John says it *now* "abides on Him." The unbeliever lives under the impending wrath of God.

Life is precarious. Every moment of life for the unbeliever is precarious. The psalmist put it well. The psalmist wrote, God has "set them in slippery places." Slippery places is a bad place to be. He's set them in slippery places: and he said, "They are cast down to destruction." (Ps 73:18).

When I read this statement, "The wrath of God abides on him," when I read it, it brings to mind the legend of Damocles and the sword. I'm sure you're familiar with it. Damocles was a courtier of the king of Syracuse. He was a man of the court, and he longed to be king; until the king, who knew this about him, set him in his place, (in the king's place), at a great banquet. And Damocles was quite happy with his new position, sitting in the king's chair—until he looked up and he saw a sword hanging over his head

by a hair. And the king was making the point to him: You want to be king? The life of the king is not enviable. It's always uncertain.

Well how much truer that is for unbelievers. They live every moment under the sword of God's wrath that can fall at any moment. And the certainty is, it will someday. Judgment has never been a popular subject—and it's a terrible subject. But it's impossible to avoid it; it's all through the Bible. And out of mercy, out of God's great mercy, He gives warnings to mankind to flee it. Down through the ages He has sent out people to do that; sent out messengers, prophets, apostles, missionaries with the message, 'Flee the wrath to come.'

But as John said, "No one receives His testimony." (vs32). People don't want to hear that. They're comfortable in the darkness. As John said, 'They love the darkness rather than the Light.' (vs19). They want to live life their way—when suddenly they're gone.

In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel tells his story of being sent to the death camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He arrived there as a young boy at night, and saw the furnaces and the sparks going—and the smoke that filled the air. He sensed what was going on. Well he was a boy at the time, living in a village in the Carpathian mountains of Romania.

There were early warnings of the coming catastrophe, some deportations of Jews. One of them that was deported was an old man he knew who worked in the synagogue. One day he returned and he told of the horror that was occurring in the forests of Poland: How the German Gestapo was killing mothers and fathers, children and babies. Miraculously he had managed to escape and he returned to the village to warn the people. He went from house to house in the village, from village to village, warning friends of what was happening.

But no one listened to him. It was just too fantastic to believe. They were optimistic about the future. They didn't want to hear such dark stories. So they dismissed the old man as mad.

Then, in the spring of 1944, they came to the village and took the people away—and they never returned. 'They had a witness—but no one listened. No one received his testimony.'

Isaiah wrote in chapter 65, verse 2, of his prophecy, God's words, "I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people." That's the LORD; He's merciful to rebels and unbelievers. He sends out messengers with the testimony of the One 'who is from above', who knows what we don't know and reveals heavenly things; the counsel of heaven, the doom of this world, and the hope of believers.

And some do believe—by God's grace. We praise God for His grace, His electing, saving grace. Otherwise, none would seek and find deliverance that is in Christ and Christ alone. We'd be content in the darkness.

Nevertheless, everyone is responsible to respond to the Lord. The Gospel message is both reasonable and generous. It is for sinners. It suits all—all without exception. And it requires faith alone. That's what God commands. He doesn't command great works, just trust in Christ.

But that takes humility, like John's, to recognize we are creatures: guilty, and spiritually and morally bankrupt who need a Savior. All who believe are saved. They have eternal life, they escape wrath.

So, if you're here and you have not done that, look to Him, trust in Him; He receives all who do and flee the wrath to come. Come to Christ and be saved.

And you who have, rejoice in that. Marvel at the grace of God that He chose you, from the foundation of the world, and sent His Son to purchase you. And they sent the Spirit to draw you. Understand that it's all of Him, and you've received everything from a sovereign, good, gracious God. And praise Him for it.

Father, what a great truth it is to know that when that day comes, when we soar to worlds unknown, or when we see Christ on His judgment throne, we have nothing to fear because we are hidden in Him. We are clothed in Him, clothed in His righteousness, we who have put our faith in Christ. We're new creatures, born again, Your children forever, sealed with the Spirit of God. That's all of grace, and we thank You Father for that.

And now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

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