

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL
THE RESCUE *begins*
GOD AMONG US
Jesus and John the Baptist

Today's lesson concerns the relationship between two distant cousins – John the Baptist and Jesus. John's ministry was to *prepare the way* for Jesus although Jesus was just a few months younger than John. What does it mean to prepare the way? It means to create a favorable environment for someone else. For example, during the times of the Billy Graham Crusades, people in the cities where Graham was to give his evangelistic messages worked together prior to the crusades preparing the way for his coming which included such things as prayer, advertising, and transportation to the crusades.

The Bible doesn't necessarily have a lot to say about John, but we do know this: he was sent to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. **Mark 1:3 (ESV)** ³ *the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'* John did this by preaching repentance and remission of the people's sins. Still today, confessing and turning from our sins, prepares the way for the Lord to move and operate in our lives as well. During the days of early Christianity, those who identified with Christ were often called Followers of the Way.

At the moment that John baptized Jesus, John understood that Jesus was The One for whom he had been preparing the way. (**John 1:22-24**). After Jesus' baptism, their ministries began to overlap until John was arrested and put in prison. John was always ready and willing to point others to Jesus. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist pointed two of his own disciples John and his friend Andrew to Jesus.

Today, we look into a problem that began because of the overlapping ministries. Interestingly, it is a problem that still occurs between churches, pastors, individual leaders within churches today – jealousy and competition between ministries.

John's mission was to point forward to the Messiah.

Read John 3:22-28 (ESV) ²² *After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.* ²³ *John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized* ²⁴ *(for John had not yet been put in prison).* ²⁵ *Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.* ²⁶ *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."* ²⁷ *John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.* ²⁸ *You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'*

We know from **John 4**, that it was not actually Jesus who was performing the rite of baptism. As He preached and the people believed His message, His disciples baptized them at His bidding. Verse 25 reads that John's disciples and a Jew were having discussions over purification. The King James translates the discussion as being with Jews. The reason for this difference is that some manuscripts show the word for Jew as plural while others do not. It is not significant whether John's disciples' discussion was with a single Jew or many.

The discussion was over purification. Purification was the act of making oneself clean and pure before God and people. The matter of purifying was important to the Jews. Under the Old Testament Law, it was necessary to keep themselves ceremonially clean if they were to serve God and please Him. Contact with a corpse, the birth of a child, the cure of leprosy and other discharges required purification. Water was the most common purifying agent although blood and fire were also used. The final element of the ritual of purification was sacrifice.

Oftentimes, at the root of a discussion, there is an undertone that goes beyond the actual discussion. In this case, we find that it was the ministry of Jesus: *look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him*. It is easy for the ugly head of jealousy to rise up even among Christians. It can happen because of the popularity of another church or another person's ministry. We express our jealousy with such comments as "They have a huge attendance. They must not be preaching the gospel." "They have so many in their class because they don't stick to class age requirements." "Their church has a gymnasium. That is why people go there."

We must remember that our true mission is to influence people to follow Christ, not us. Tearing down the ministry of another person or another church is not **the way** to build up the body of Christ.

We might wonder, "Why did John the Baptist continue to baptize after Jesus came onto the scene?" Shouldn't he just have joined the "Jesus crowd?" That was not what John was called to do. Every believer is uniquely gifted and called by God. Even with Jesus beginning his own ministry, John could still point people to Jesus in his own unique way. John was in a somewhat different area connecting with different folks. We are not to give up doing what the Lord has called us to do just because of someone else's ministry. Each individual is different – each church is different. We serve the same Lord in different ways. **2 Corinthians 10:17 (ESV)** ¹⁷ *"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

In John's response to his disciples, we see the evidence of the true heart of a servant. Our gifts and opportunities are from the Lord and we must give God the glory.

John had said from the beginning that he was not the Christ. In fact, John was rejoicing in the Lord even before he was born! John's mother said to the mother of Jesus in **Luke 1:44 (ESV)** ⁴⁴ *For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy..* John was born for the purpose of pointing to the Light of the World. **John 1:6-8 (ESV)** ⁶ *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.* ⁷ *He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.* ⁸ *He was not the light,*

but came to bear witness about the light. We are born for the same purpose to point others to Jesus. However, we are called to perform that service in different ways.

John's manner was humble and joyful toward the Messiah.

Read John 3:29-30 (ESV) ²⁹ *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.* ³⁰ *He must increase, but I must decrease.*"

John Piper says, "John the Baptist takes the conversation in a direction that *seems* to have nothing to do with purification and everything to do with who Jesus is (as the bridegroom) and who John is (as the friend of the bridegroom) and what's happening in their ministries (as the bride leaves John and goes to the bridegroom)—and especially how John responds to all this in his heart.

The image of the Bridegroom was significant to the Jewish people because Jehovah had a 'marriage covenant' with the nation. **Isaiah 54:5 (ESV)** ⁵ *For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.*

John is referencing Jesus the Messiah as being the Bridegroom. In **Matthew 9:15**, Jesus spoke of Himself as being the Bridegroom. Jesus' Bride is the church (**Ephesians 5:25-33**) and we are united with Him by faith.

John understood his role in the wedding of the Bridegroom and the Bride. He had a role in planning the wedding ceremony! At a wedding, the bride is the one interested in her bridegroom, and the bridegroom's joy is found in his bride. But they had then, as we have today, the "best man," as we call him, the friend of the bridegroom. And the friend of the bridegroom found his delight in the bridegroom's joy. We hear a lot about 'wedding planners' in our day. They have even made movies about wedding planners. As Christ followers in the 21st century, we are the Bride of Christ; but we are also to be wedding planners with the purpose of adding to the Bride of Christ. **Revelation 22:17 (ESV)** ¹⁷ *The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.*

John represents the kind of response we should have to the Lord: *He must increase, but I must decrease.* John's heart responds in such a way to Jesus that many in that day and now find unintelligible—that is, abounding joy over himself getting smaller and Jesus getting bigger. Those who know the Son of God as Savior recognize that when Jesus increases our joy increases! There is no room in the family of God for pride in one's own popularity or personal accomplishments. Our work should be 'all about Him' and never about us...

John's message was one of warning and witness.

Read John 3:31-36 (ESV) ³¹ *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.* ³² *He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.* ³³ *Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.* ³⁴ *For he whom God has sent utters 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 *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.*

Some scholars debate whether these are the words of John the Baptist or John the disciple. It makes no difference since they are the inspired Word of God. *He who comes from above* refers to Jesus Christ. *He who is of the earth* refers to John the Baptist (**and everyone else who ever lived or will live**). John emphasized his own earthly origin and its limitations. John proclaimed divine truth on earth. On the other hand, Jesus who is *from heaven is above all* proclaimed divine truth from above. For example, **John 14:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* Jesus is God's Truth who comes to us from heaven.

In verse 32, we are told the testimony of the One from Above was not well received. Those who do receive His witness discover it through personal experience that His witness is true. Our Lord's teachings are not to be studied intellectually. They are not to be separated from everyday life. It is when we obey His Word and put it into practice that we see its truth and experience its power.

Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. In a society where many could not read, seals were used to convey a clear message, even to the illiterate. A seal indicated ownership to all and expressed a person's personal guarantee. To receive Jesus' testimony is to certify that **God is true** regarding what He has sealed. **Ephesians 1:13 (ESV)** ¹³ *In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.*

God authorized and sent His Son to earth for us! Jesus is God's Word to us. God who is Spirit gave His Son His Spirit which Jesus promised to all who believe in Him. What a commissioning! To reject the Son's witness is to rebel against the highest authority in the universe.

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. This is the only place in the gospel of John where wrath is mentioned. There can be no neutrality when it comes to the witness of Jesus Christ: we either trust Him or reject Him. The question remains: **Hebrews 2:3 (ESV)** ³ *how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?... The answer is clear – there is no escape unless we put our faith and trust in Jesus. That is why it is so critical that we do the work we are called to do – that is prepare the way for others to see Jesus. There is no room for jealousy or competition. It is not about us – as John the Baptist knew – it is all about Jesus! Prepare the way for others to come to Him...*