

The Light and the Lamp
Part Six. Jesus the New Defining Center
John 3.22-36

David Henderson

John 1.6-9

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

This morning we wrap up our series on the first three chapters of John's gospel. In those three chapters two men are the focus of the story, two men whose lives overlapped in time and in purpose. Two men whose hearts could not have been more similar, and whose natures could not have been more different. .

John, the last in a long line of prophets, and Jesus, the promised Messiah. Jesus, who in John 1.9 is called The Light, and John, who in John 5.35 is called the Lamp.

Through most of these chapters, as you know if you've been following along in this series or are familiar with John's gospel, Jesus is the main focus, but as we come to the end of chapter three and the end of this series, both John and Jesus come back into view.

Let's turn to John chapter 3 and pick up the story in verse 22.

John 3.22-24

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. Now John also was baptizing – at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. (This was before John was put in prison.)

John 3.25-26

An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

You can hear the tension in their voice – maybe hurt, maybe fear, maybe jealousy.

Jesus' ministry is on the ascendency. John's disciples watch nervously as the crowd begins to look over John's shoulder to this Jesus on the rise, some even shifting their allegiance to him.

"Everybody is going to him instead of coming to us," they caution (John 3.26).

They are anxious that Jesus is eclipsing, even undermining, their own teacher's eminence. We know from John 1.40 that it isn't just the crowds of onlookers who are turning their attention to Jesus. Even one of John's own disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, has left John and become a follower of Jesus.

You hear jealousy and fear in John's followers . . . but not in John. Listen to his reply.

What troubles them delights John. "Yes!" he as much as says. "That is just what God intends! And I couldn't be happier."

John 3.27-28

[To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.'"]

To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.

New Testament scholar FF Bruce paraphrases this Hebrew idiom this way:

Each person has his allotted calling or ministry from God; his job is to fulfill that.

John is clear about who gets to determine his life calling. As The Living Bible puts it:

God in heaven appoints each man's work.

Have you ever thought to ask God what his call on your life is? What his work is for you?

Our world likes to tell us that our vocation is up to us, and we can do anything we put our minds to. And then, once we've done it, we retire, and the rest of our lives are ours to use however we want. .

But the Bible offers a different perspective: God in heaven appoints each man's work.

Ephesians 2.10 says that God prepared good works in advance for us to walk in. Regardless of how old you are or what stage of life you are at, what if you were to ask God what that calling is, what those good works are, that God is inviting you into?

John goes on.

You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’”

I’m not the one in whom my followers should put their trust, I’m not the one who will meet all their needs, the one in whom God’s purposes are fulfilled, the one they can’t do without. No, John says, but I know the one who is and does.

My calling isn’t about me – about putting myself or keeping myself at the center. In a world that’s all about self-promotion, my ambition is to fulfill God’s purpose as Jesus’s forerunner, not to seek my own glory.

I am only here to prepare the way for another. I’m not the destination. I just pave highways toward it.

The word behind this expression “sent ahead of him” is the familiar word “apostle.” This word was something of a technical term in biblical times. It meant someone appointed and sent by someone else to carry out a commission, a co-mission, for that person, acting on that person’s behalf, as that person’s agent and representative.

John says he is a sent one, an apostle. Later in the gospel that same word will be used by Jesus to describe us. At the end of John’s gospel, Jesus prays for all those who will follow him – including us. In John 17.18 he prays,

As you sent me into the world I have sent them into the world.

Same word. We too are his agents and representatives, called to carry out a co-mission on his behalf. I’m not God’s answer to the world, but I get to serve the One who is.

So while John’s followers are miffed that people are looking past John to Jesus, John himself is delighted.

To express the depths of his joy, he shifts his metaphor. His joy isn’t just that of an envoy representing a king, or a worker doing business on behalf of his business owner.

He is like the best man whose commission is to carry off the perfect wedding.

John 3.29

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.

The role of the best man in an ancient Jewish wedding was far broader than someone who has the same role today.

Today the best man’s job is to make sure the rings and the wedding license don’t get lost, and maybe to plan a bachelor party.

In ancient times, the best man was like the master of ceremonies. His job was to see that everything about the wedding went well.

Sometimes he was involved in negotiating for the hand of the bride on the groom's behalf. He often contributed financially to the cost of the wedding. He was the one who arranged the processions that brought the bride and the groom together at the ceremony. Throughout the celebration he stood by the groom's side, to serve him in whatever way was needed. And he was the chief witness to the exchange of vows.

Have any of you seen the Steve Martin version of *The Father of the Bride*? Think Frahnk:

Thees ees what I sahg-joost for a spec-tah-coo-lar, fah-boo-loos wah-ding.

Okay, maybe don't think Frahnk.

Let's look a little closer at what John says.

The bride belongs to the bridegroom.

This is a fascinating window onto what is going on in John's heart. The best man would never dream of vying with the groom for the affections of the bride.

This is especially relevant for anybody who serves in any capacity in the church.

When leaders lead, they stand at the center of things. It would be easy to conclude that everything is about them, pivots on them, that they are the most important person in the room. But that isn't true.

John insists that Jesus is the primary actor in this redemptive drama. He, John, is merely the foremost witness to his work, glad to have a front row seat, blessed to go and tell the world what he's been blessed to see.

Because I am clear about my relationship with him, John says, I am clear about my relationship with you, those I lead. It would be a travesty if you, the bride, fell in love with me, the bridegroom's friend. I want your eyes to be on him. Your heart's first attachment should be to him, not to me.

John says

The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him,

This is what he seems to be saying:

My life isn't ultimately about me. My worth and value, my significance and purpose is tied directly to Jesus and his work in this world. It is his name on the lips of others – not mine – that I am most eager to hear. My joy is found in his reputation . . . not my own.

When I walk out of the room, I want people to be talking about him and not me. My ambition is to fulfill God's purpose as Jesus's forerunner, not to seek my own glory.

So I am free not to be defined by your love for me – or lack of it. I am not driven to gain your approval or affection. I am not devastated when you criticize me or disapprove of me or leave me for others.

My focus isn't on me. And it's not on you. It's on him. My eyes are on him, waiting for his signal. My ears are tuned to his voice, ready to respond to his call. My life is surrendered to his purposes.

Who is your life ultimately about?

Clearly John's life mission is shifting at this point in his ministry. He no longer goes ahead of Jesus. Now he comes behind him as his follower, and gives us a beautiful picture of what that looks like.

The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.

The word "joy" dances through these words. John says he "rejoices with joy" and that his joy is "filled full" when Jesus steps into the room and the eyes of the bride turn to him.

My life's greatest joy isn't about me at all. It's about him, and what He is doing in this world.

I'm all about bringing God and his people together. My one concern is their relationship with *him*. My greatest joy is to see the bride find joy in the bridegroom, and to see that love reciprocated in his eyes.

What is your greatest joy?

All of this leads up to that great summary line from John, the last line he says in John's gospel.

John 3.30

He must increase, but I must decrease.

Different translations capture this in different ways

He must increase, but I must decrease. (ESV)

He must become greater; I must become less. (NIV)

He must become more important, while I become less important. (CEV)

[He must] move into the center, while I slip off to the sidelines. (Message)

But they all get at the same idea. Jesus is more important than me, and he comes ahead of me.

Where is your joy found?

What is your deepest ambition?

Who is the defining center of your life?

Whose reputation is your life concerned with?

Who is most important in your life?

Augustine says there is a love of God that leads to a forgetfulness of self, and a love of self that leads to forgetfulness of God.

Which kind of love marks your life?

Ronald Knox was a Catholic priest and writer in the middle of the last century who translated the Bible from Latin. He also wrote some wonderful mysteries, by the way.

In the forward to his Bible translation there is this wonderful description of John's life and ministry.

"Everyone is crowded round St John, everyone wanting to know who he is, and he will let them see nothing but the finger that points to a greater than himself, let them hear nothing but the voice of the fore-runner who preaches a gospel not his own."

What would it look like for your life to be nothing but a finger that points to a greater than yourself?

Before we go on, I want to invite you to give yourself in a new and deeper way to the work of witness, to take your place alongside John as one whose greatest joy is to point past yourself – in your words, in your actions, in the way you spend your time, in the way you use your gifts and resources, in the way you carry out your calling – to point past yourself to a greater than yourself.

What is something that could change in your life right now to make that more of a reality? What is a step you could take this week to decrease your own importance in your life so that your life more fully point to him?

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As we turn to the last six verses in the chapter, which I want to do briefly, John the disciple takes our eyes off the Lamp, just as John the forerunner would wish, and puts them back squarely on Jesus, the Light.

It's not clear whether these are the words of John the Baptist or John the disciple. But it doesn't really matter. With these words John knits together the whole first part of his gospel and leaves us at a decision point.

I want to read these verses and then I'll paraphrase what they are saying.

John 3.31

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

John 3.32-34

He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.

John 3.35-36

The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

Here's the basic idea:

There are two realms of existence: there is the supernatural realm with God at its center, and there is the physical realm with us as its occupants, a physical realm that finds its source in God. It exists because of God's decision.

We as earth-bound residents can only guess what is true about that other realm. But Jesus is God coming to us from that other realm, and he comes with exclusive spiritual authority.

First, he has the authority of experience, speaking of what he himself knows and has been part of eternally, since long before the moment of creation. He closes the infinite distance between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, coming to us as an expert on heaven because it is his realm.

And second, he has the authority of divinity. Eternally one with the Father and the Spirit, God the Son is loved by God the Father, and He is sent in love by God the Father and empowered by God the Spirit on his rescue mission to the world, and He is given all authority in heaven and on earth. He rules over all, and everything has been placed in his hands.

When we human beings in this physical realm accept his message, when we believe in him, we are made citizens of that other realm, and we are brought into that other world's eternal life. And as long as we remain here on earth, we, like John, are part of the validation of the truth of the Word that God spoke when he sent his son.

When we do not accept his message, when we deny his divine identity and reject his heavenly authority, we place ourselves outside of that other realm. We also stand outside of God's forgiveness and new life. By refusing to accept him, we accept God's just judgment for our sin instead.

To what do you give final authority in your life?

Who or what rules over all in your life?

Where do you stand in relationship to that other realm?

What is your response to God's invitation for you to experience eternal life in Christ by accepting him and his authority in your life?

During this series we have unfolded a number of beautiful metaphors that Jesus used to help us understand who he really is:

Jesus the Word who communicates the heart of God to the world.

Jesus the Ladder who opens up access to heaven.

Jesus the Wine who brings joy and blessing to thirsty souls.

Jesus the Temple in whom we can draw near to God and God draws near to us.

Jesus the Breath of Life who brings new life, new birth, to this world.

Again I want to invite you to give yourself in a new and deeper way this morning, not only to shining as a lamp in this world but to loving and serving the light, not only to take your place alongside John in his work of witness, but to take your place at the feet of Jesus in worship and surrender,

More fully than ever before to give your life over to the One who is over all, to resolve more fully than ever before to live your life not for yourself but for Him, to open up each part of your life to Him, including those parts of your life that you've not yet given him access to, and to say yes to him with your whole life.

What is something that could change in your life right now to make that more of a reality? What is a part of your life you could bring more fully under his lordship this week? What is a step you could take to let Jesus increase in your life?

He must increase, but I must decrease. (ESV)

He must become greater; I must become less. (NIV)

He must become more important, while I become less important. (CEV)

[He must] move into the center, while I slip off to the sidelines. (Message)

God, make it so.

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As we come to our closing song this morning, I want to ask you to join me in what may feel like a risky step.

We don't often give you a chance to do something public as an expression of what God is doing in your life. But during each of the last six Sundays we have given you an opportunity to pray to entrust your life to Jesus by faith.

If during this series,

 you have made a commitment to follow Jesus for the first time,
 you have made a commitment to follow him more faithfully from this point forward,

 you have made a commitment to witness to him more faithfully,
 you have asked him to increase in your life and to help you to decrease,
then during this song I invite you to stand while we're singing as a way of marking that commitment. Then when we get to the closing stanza of the song we'll invite everyone to stand.

This isn't about what anybody else is doing. This isn't about standing up because others are standing up. This is just a chance to solidify your commitment before God, to say to Him, I mean it, I stand by what I said.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, hear our hearts this morning. We worship you and open our lives to you.

Closing Song: More of You

 If more of You
 Means less of me
 Take everything