
LIFE IN HIS NAME

COME TO THE LIGHT

John 3:22-36

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison).

Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 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." John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 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. He must increase, but I must decrease."

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. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard; yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 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.

We ended last week's study, as we are working our way through the gospel of John, with this powerful image of light and darkness. John tells us about a conversation that Jesus has with a prominent rabbi, a prominent teacher named Nicodemus. Jesus explains to Nicodemus, "You cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless you are born again, unless you are born of the Spirit of God." Jesus made it clear: "I am not talking about a natural, fleshly birth. This is to be born of the will of God, of the work of God. God's Spirit comes in and gives you life." How does this happen?

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You hear the message of the Son of God and his love and his sacrifice for your sin. You believe in him and you are given new life.

As Jesus interacts with Nicodemus, and then John explains what is going on, we come to the most famous verse in the entire bible: John 3:16. We are told there about the love of God, that it is God's love that motivates this sacrifice for our sin, and that all who believes in Christ shall receive everlasting life. This is good news. This is the gospel. Really, this is the message of the bible.

But it provokes a question. Why is this necessary? John gives us this explanation. He tells us that mankind is lost, that mankind stands under a sentence of condemnation, and that mankind is in darkness. But if you remember last week's study, you will remember that John doesn't simply come out and ascribe to us that condition. Very uniquely, he explains we are not just lost, but we are so lost we don't even know we are lost. We are not just under condemnation, the judgment of God, but the tragedy of that is that we are alienated from God. We have turned our backs on God, and God is the only one who can help us in the condition which we are in. We are not just in darkness, but we love the darkness, and when we catch a glimpse of the glory of God we retreat further into darkness.

We ended with this powerful application that to come to Christ is to come to the light. We stop justifying our sin, defending ourselves, accusing others, comparing ourselves to others so that we might look good. We stop all of the defense mechanisms that relationally keep us going and somehow in our own hearts tell us that we are right and vindicate ourselves, so that we transparently come out in repentance and say, "Lord, I have sinned. Cleanse me and forgive me." When we come to Christ in that way, repenting of our sin and trusting in him, we are born anew of the Spirit of God. We receive the Spirit of God in us. We are born again and we have the promise of eternal life.

What happens from that moment until we die? Well, we live to display the light of God. In many ways, our life is just a journey of learning to walk in the light, to come to the light, to live a life of humility and transparency as we depend on God. Let me say that again, because I am defining your experience as a Christian. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, I am defining your experience and my experience in very strong biblical, clear terms. Sometimes we get foggy and unclear in our thinking. The Christian life is characterized by humility, transparency, and approachability as we focus on God and display him for his glory, and our joy is found in his glory.

We come to today's passage building on that image of walking in the light. John the Baptist is the main character of today's passage, and in many ways he is the supreme example of this image, of walking in the light. He is an excellent example of humility and exalting Christ. In fact, if you remember from earlier parts of the gospel of John, John the Baptist came preparing the way for Jesus, saying, "Listen, I am not the One."

There were masses of people coming to hear John. He was extremely popular, very influential, but he was making these clear statements: "I am not the light." "I am not the true light." "I just bear witness." "Jesus is the Lamb of God. He takes away the sin of the world." "The Old Testament image, the sacred image that Judaism gives us of the sacrificial lamb is fulfilled in Jesus Christ." And John the Baptist makes this astounding claim. You see him pointing at Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Then John would say, "He comes after me. He who comes after me is before me because he has always been." Then he makes this statement: "I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal."

You have this prominent leader, perhaps (I don't think it's an exaggeration to say) the most popular leader of his day, pointing people to Jesus and then making this profound statement of humility: "I am not even worthy to untie his sandal." Do you remember way back when we were in John 1, we said that that was the most menial of tasks, that a disciple was never asked to do that of his master? It was considered beneath him and not something that should be asked. And John says, "Not only would I do it, I am not even worthy to do it."

Our topic today, really then, as we look at this passage is: How do we walk in the light? How do we embrace this humility that John displays for us? We are going to look at three points from his example, three points and three principles, if you will. The first one is:

I. Humility and Trust, verses 22-27.

I am going to display on the screen the statement itself that I think best characterizes this, which is verse 27. John the Baptist, speaking to his followers, makes this statement: "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven." This is a wisdom statement, a proverb if you will, that John the Baptist shares with his followers and then explains. I want to suggest to you that this is a foundational principle for life. This is a foundational principle in the sense that it tells you how to think.

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I have this sense that I need to help you for a moment, that it would serve you to think for a moment about how this is going to help you in your relationships and in life. You see, sin destroys the things that are precious in life. God gives us these tremendous blessings. I am not talking now about the more superficial blessings of comfort or wealth or any of those things. I am talking about the more precious blessings of family relationship and close friendship, and the love that we share, and health -- those kinds of things. What happens is: Sin cuts us off from God. It comes in and it twists those things that are most precious. For example, we love our children so passionately, but our alienation from God and their alienation from God severely test that relationship. Even marriage, especially marriage -- we see in scripture in Genesis Chapter 3 that the moment sin entered the world that relationship began to fracture.

So, when Christ comes into our hearts, he cleanses us of that sin and we begin to experience healing in all of those areas. But there is a process of learning to come out of the darkness, out of our sin into the light. Right? Are you with me? I am tempted to just go back and repeat all of that all over again.

“So, Brian, you are saying to us God’s word is teaching I am healed in Christ. It is going to transform my relationships, but that is going to be characterized by walking in the light, not in the darkness. Humility and trust in Christ.” Right. There is this foundational principle here that governs all your thinking, and it has to do with trust. You learn to trust in God, that he has got you. You receive it from him and your destiny is secure in God. No person can take it from you. You belong to God, he has something for you, and no one can take it from you. In a sense you could say that you might forfeit it, but no one is going to take it from you.

I think of the example of Esther. Do you remember Esther from the Old Testament? She was placed in the king’s palace and the Jewish people were under the threat of intense persecution. Here she is in the palace and Mordecai speaks to her these words. He says, “Listen, don’t think that you are safe here, that all of God’s people will be destroyed and you will be safe here. You are a part of God’s people. You will be identified with God’s people, and you will go down with them. You must act.” Do you remember this great statement where Mordecai says to her, “Perhaps you were born for this time. Perhaps this is your moment of destiny. But if you won’t act, Esther, you will be destroyed, but God will raise someone else up to fulfill this purpose.” It’s a great summary

of destiny. God has a purpose for you, a destiny for you. No one else is going to take it from you. Don't forfeit it. Trust God with it.

But the real application here, which is so interesting, is that John is stepping back. His disciples are jealous because Jesus' followers are now baptizing more people. The real application that he focuses on is humility, and I want you to get this connection between trust and humility. There is a conjunction, a beautiful union of these two qualities that are exhibited in John the Baptist's life. He is warning us about something. He is warning us about the sin of covetousness, of envy. The envy of others points to a deep discontentment with what God has ordained for you.

Let's walk through that. Perhaps the best way to do that is to just look at the context. John is there baptizing people. His disciples, his followers are baptizing. Jesus comes into the region and John's followers are observing Jesus baptizing. In the meantime, a Jewish man comes to them (I assume it's a man) and he has a debate with the followers of John the Baptist, a debate over baptism.

Imagine that. Two thousand years later we are still debating baptism. It's not clearly defined in the Old Testament scripture, but there were rites of purification, rites of washing. That practice had developed over time based on certain Old Testament practices. There were some Israelites in John's day who would daily wash in cold water as a symbol of purification. There is a debate now going on with this individual and John the Baptist's followers. "What is your baptism? How does it compare to that of the Old Testament?" We have then a third baptism, which is Jesus' baptism. It provokes this question. Don't you wish in some ways that John the Baptist, or John the gospel writer would have just given us a definition of the three baptisms? "Okay, here is exactly what the Old Testament baptisms meant. Here is exactly what my baptism means. Here is exactly what Jesus' baptism means." It would be wonderful.

He doesn't do that. He does something different. He basically (and the whole passage carries this message) says, "Jesus is so above everything, and to be exalted, you have to get your mind for a moment off of these questions and look to him, because if you don't get the Jesus question right, it doesn't matter if you answer the baptism question right." Do you see that? It's really powerful. That's true, isn't it, in everything? As Christians, we start with Christ.

Here is the application that John makes. His disciples are tempted to take offense for him. They are like, "Wow, we were the biggest show in town! We had a great thing going. We are looking

over the river and everyone is going to Jesus!” Then John says, “Well, don’t you understand a man can only receive what God gives him?” In fact, he says it stronger than that, doesn’t he? He says, “A man cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from God, given him from heaven.” John understands that he has a place in God’s plan. It has been given to him from God. But he doesn’t want it to be more. He doesn’t want it to be different. He is in a place of trust, not in a place of envy, so he models for us something very important.

Before we leave this first point, let’s illustrate this and apply it by talking about baptism for a minute. Here we are 2000 years later. We have a debate going on about Christian baptism -- three baptisms again, but not the same three. We have the baptism that is called Regenerational, or baptism that brings regeneration. Most prominently, the Roman Catholic Church would teach that the act of baptism itself, apart from faith, brings regeneration, brings new life.

Just to completely confuse you, there would be others beyond Roman Catholics. There would be Protestant groups that teach something similar (e.g., the Church of Christ), that would teach you couldn’t be saved unless you are baptized, and baptized properly. So:

1. Baptism by Regeneration. You are getting a little doctrinal study this morning.
2. What we would call Covenant Baptism. Covenant Baptism is typically practiced for infants and is not symbolizing that they are saved, but that they have been born into the covenant community. It is very much like circumcision in the Old Testament. It would identify that you belong to the people of God. Baptism for an infant with Christian parents symbolizes that you belong to the covenant community.
3. Then there is thirdly, Believers’ Baptism. Believers’ Baptism is the conviction that (and this is what we practice here at Riverside, so of course it’s right, though there is huge debate) when a person comes to faith in Christ, the first thing that he or she does is follow Christ in baptism. It identifies us with Christ. Being lowered under the water is a symbol of death to the old life, a washing of our sins, being resurrected with Christ, united with him to live a new life in his power.

I don’t want to imply to you that baptism is unimportant. I am telling you very clearly that I think the teaching of the passage and the teaching of scripture is that you have to get things right with

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Jesus first, and that's much more important. If you don't get it right, but you do get baptism right, you will still be wrong.

Having said that, if you are here today and you have not followed the Lord in baptism, it seems completely contrary to what faith would call us to do. It is an important act of obedience to follow the Lord -- to say, "Lord, I am trusting you with all of eternity and my life, and the first thing you tell me to do is follow you in baptism, but I don't trust you with that" just simply doesn't make sense. I would encourage you if you have not followed the Lord in baptism but you trust in Christ, that you should take that step of obedience. Jesus himself was baptized as an example for us.

Here you have this context, a debate on baptism. John says, "Okay listen, and let's not get off track. Focus on Christ. Focus on Jesus, and as we do that, trust God for your destiny."

II. Humility and Purpose.

#1 -- Humility and Trust. #2 - Humility and Purpose.

We are talking here about Christ-exalting purpose. Again, this is summarized concisely in a nice statement. In verse 30 John states, "He must increase, I must decrease." Now we have a principle, but it's a practical principle, a principle of action. First we talked about how to think. Now this principle governs us in how to live in terms of how to act. We live and act in a way that we decrease and Christ increases.

In order to teach this, John the Baptist uses this image of the bride and the groom, and what we would call the best man. It's funny -- we just had a wedding here a few days ago. I had something happen that I have never had happen in a marriage ceremony. We were standing here going through the vows and we went to exchange the rings. I looked at the best man and asked for the ring, but he had this panicked look on his face. He didn't have the rings. I didn't realize it, but he had already sent one of the other groomsmen out to look for the rings. As I looked at him and asked for the rings, he just turns around and runs. So we stalled, and he came back with the rings. He doesn't attend here at Riverside. No one who attends Riverside would ever do such a thing. Afterward, I was talking with the best man and said, "You had one thing to do, just one. You didn't even have to speak."

There is a role even for us for the best man. In Jesus' day it was much more prominent. But imagine in a wedding ceremony that the best man decides he needs a little bit bigger role. So he

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steps over by the bride and tells the groom, "Listen, just step back. I've got this." It's completely inappropriate, right? That's the image that's used here. John is saying, "Do you understand that my role is to make a way for Christ? It is to make a way for you to see him and to behold him and to trust in him."

He is modeling something for us. In the Christian life as we mature and grow we can apply this principle. He must increase, but I must decrease. The more mature we become, the more we realize that as Christ is exalted, I experience tremendous joy, and that the things I am tempted to look to bring me joy are not where I should put my focus. We realize that if God ordains a trial for me, but in it he is going to be exalted and I am going to know him in a more personal way, I will know greater joy there than I will in the complete prosperity that I might desire. So he must increase, I must decrease.

There is a picture that comes to mind for me from The Lord of the Rings. Remember, Denethor is the steward of Gondor. He rules Gondor, but he is not really the king. He is just a steward. After 25 or 26 stewards, they are holding the place for the true king. Aragorn comes back. He is the true king, though he is this messianic figure who is reluctant to step in to that place. There is this tension you feel. After so long, will the stewards step back and say, "This throne is yours"?

There is a place where we represent Christ to others. As Christians we are ambassadors of reconciliation. We want to go and represent the Lord, and encourage people to trust in Christ, and to be forgiven so that they might be reconciled to God. But really, our role is not to rule, not to be "it," but to step back so that people may experience Christ for themselves. We want to lift up the Lord Jesus.

We saw it earlier in this passage, in verses 14 and 15 -- this image that Jesus shared with Nicodemus. "...as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" -- this picture that as Jesus is lifted up on the cross and we look to him, the curse of our sin is placed on him, we trust in him, and we are freed from that curse of sin. But it also carries with it this admonition to live a life of exalting Christ as we proclaim his sacrifice. We live to worship Christ, to exalt him, and it is a principle of practice. It governs all of our activity. Whether you are praying about what to eat or drink, or how to live, or career, or marriage, or friendship, this principle will guide you: In business, in life, in all things -

what will bring the most glory to Jesus Christ? He has promised us in John 12:32: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

III. The third and final principle has to do with Humility and Life.

Verse 36 summarizes our point here: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.” In this last section (verses 31-36) John the Baptist is no longer walking with his followers. Again, John the gospel writer is summarizing for us what has taken place. Do you remember in our study of the first half of the chapter we had in verses 1-15 a conversation with Jesus and Nicodemus? Then John gives us a summary in verse 16-21. We have the same thing happening here in verses 31 through 36. I want to call this principle a dynamic principle, a principle of life, a principle of power. Where does the power come from for you to live a life of humility, trusting in God, and exalting Christ in all you do? It comes from Jesus Christ. It comes by his grace. It comes from the life of God living in you.

In verse 31 (just walking through these verses very quickly) the emphasis is on what we have already talked about in the second point: Jesus is above all. “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.” Jesus is exalted (verse 32). His word is absolutely true.

This is interesting, because this is echoing the theme we have seen earlier in the chapter. Verse 32: “He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.” Verse 33: “Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.” We have had these apparent contradictions. No one believes, but the one who believes...and what is the point? The emphasis throughout the chapter is this: Left to our own, we will retreat in darkness. We will not follow Christ. We will not believe in Christ. We need that spark of divine life, where the Spirit of God comes in and warms our hearts to divine things. Jesus’ beginning point with Nicodemus was what? You must be born again.

Many times we think the first move of God in our lives is the conviction of sin. We begin to sense that we have sinned, and that we are in trouble with God, and we need help. We often call attention to that as the first work or move. That’s probably not accurate. Probably, for most of us, what happens just before that is we begin to get a glimpse of God in his glory. If you look scripturally, you will find that the conviction of sin comes when we behold the glory of Jesus Christ.

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Isaiah Chapter 6 -- do you remember that Isaiah had his great vision of God in the throne room? It's a majestic, majestic passage where he beholds the Lord. What is the first thing that he does after he sees God? He says, "Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Conviction comes as we behold the Lord. We then either retreat into the darkness, or come to him as his life fills us, repenting of our sin, and receiving forgiveness.

So here we have verse 32: "He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true." Those that God brings to life receive his testimony, respond in faith, and you become a seal to the authenticity of Christ and his word. "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure." The picture there is that the Holy Spirit is given to Jesus. Jesus ministers in the power of the Spirit, then those who come and believe in him receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Now we have a complete picture of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect unity and love, and we are invited into it. "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."

John is summarizing here the themes of the entire chapter. We stand in a place, rightly under the judgment of God because of our rejection of God. But God in his love sends his Son that we might be saved and be given eternal life. There is with that summary a practical call to live to exalt Christ as we live upon the foundation of trusting him for all that we need.

Let's pray.