

John 3b Farewell to the Baptist

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Overview

From this point and through Chapter 4, the Lord is outside of Jerusalem. Three episodes, in three different areas, highlight three different individuals of “his own” who received him:

- 3:22-36, John the Baptist, in Judaea
- 4:1-42, the woman at the well, in Samaria
- 4:43-54, the nobleman of Capernaum

The Judaeian episode that closes ch. 3 bears strong similarities to the Nicodemus episode at the beginning of the chapter.

- Both begin with narrative and end with the Evangelist’s commentary.
- There are strong verbal parallels between the two sections of the Evangelist’s commentary.

These similarities urge us to compare the responses of John’s and Nicodemus to the Lord’s growing prominence.

Nicodemus	John
Condescending: 3:2, “Rabbi,” “we know that thou art a teacher come from God.”	Obsequious: 1:15, “This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me.”
Implicitly invites Jesus to join the Pharisees	Sends his disciples off to follow Jesus
Nonplussed by Jesus’ demand that he be born from above in submission to Jesus’ authority	Rejoices at Jesus’ growing popularity

22-30, Narrative

He ... baptized.—It is natural that his disciples should continue the ministry that they had learned from John. Here Jesus is said to baptize, though 4:2 makes it clear that the point is his authorization of what they did, not his own personal baptizing. Calvin on 4:2:

He gives the designation of *Christ’s Baptism* to that which he conferred by the hands of other, in order to inform us that Baptism ought not to be estimated by the person of the minister, but that its power depends entirely on its Author, in whose name, and by whose authority, it is conferred. Hence we derive a remarkable consolation, when we know that our baptism has no less efficacy to wash and renew us, than if it had been given by the hand of the Son of God. Nor can it be doubted that, so long as he lived in the world, he abstained from the outward administration of the sign, for the express purpose of testifying to all ages, that Baptism loses nothing of its value when it is administered by a mortal man.

23 John also was baptizing.—This sets up the following conversation, which has the nature of a competition between the Lord and John.

25-31a The Baptist's Final Testimony

Just as the first half of the chapter records a discussion between our Lord and Nicodemus, the second half records a discussion between John and his disciples.

The Stimulating Incident

The Jews.—Actually, the MT reads, “a Jew” or “a Judaeen.” This appears to be a question from a single individual, rather than a delegation from Jerusalem as in ch. 1.

A question arose between.—Better, “arose from.” John’s disciples inaugurated this discussion. Perhaps they were aggressively promoting John’s baptism and trying to persuade someone to come and be baptized. Apparently the person to whom they were speaking asked them how their baptism differed from that of Jesus and his disciples. They find themselves now in what they perceive as a competitive market for spiritual renewal, and they talk to John about it.

The disciples' concern

26, the same baptizeth.—The disciples were surprised to learn this, and bring the intelligence to John, perhaps expecting him to show some sign of jealousy. They themselves are dismayed to learn that “all men come to him.” He is eating into their market! Cf. Borchert: “Disciples of teachers are often more zealous for their teachers’ perspectives than the teachers themselves¹.” Our Lord’s disciples were not innocent of this tendency, as seen in the incident of one casting out devils, Mark 9:38.

John's Response

John’s response is a model for us all in dealing with ambition and conflict. He first enunciates a fundamental principle of the spiritual life, and then states how it applies to him, in three stages: a literal statement of his mission, a parabolic explanation, and then his personal response to their concern.

27, except it be given him from heaven.—John here enunciates a fundamental principle of the spiritual life, which is to recognize that the role we have to play in this life is assigned by the Lord, and we should be content to fulfill that role rather than wishing we had been given another. This principle is so important that it is repeated several times in Scripture:

- Christ to Pilate in 19:11, “Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power *at all* against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.”
- Even Christ himself, in Hebrews 5:4,5, speaking of the priesthood, “no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as *was* Aaron. 5 So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee.”

¹Borchert, G. L. (2001, c1996). *Vol. 25A: John 1-11*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

- General statement of the principle in Rom 12:3, “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.”

John now applies this principle to himself.

28, Literal statement of his role.—He starts by remind them of what they have already heard from him. The phrases in this verse are a synopsis of major themes in his testimony in 1:19-34:

3:28	Ch. 1:
I am not the Christ	20, I am not the Christ (slightly different word order: “It is not I who am the Christ, but this one over here.”)
I am sent ...	33, he that sent me to baptize with water
... before him	23, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.”

29a, Figurative Statement of his Role.—Now John defines his role in figurative terms, building on the image of the divine marriage between the Lord and his people. This image originates in the OT, is here reinforced by John, and continues in NT teaching (e.g., Eph 5).

1. Jehovah as the husband of Israel: both historically and eschatologically—see Hosea 2 for the relation between the two.

○ Historically

- **Isaiah 50:1** Thus saith the LORD, Where *is* the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away.
- **Isaiah 54:5** For thy Maker *is* thine husband; the LORD of hosts *is* his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called.
- **Jeremiah 31:32** the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD.
- **Jeremiah 3:14** Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion:
- **Ezekiel 16:8** Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time *was* the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine.

○ Eschatologically

- **Hosea 2:16** And it shall be at that day, saith the LORD, *that* thou shalt call me Ishi; and shalt call me no more Baali.

- **Isa 62:4** Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married. ⁵ For *as* a young man marrieth a virgin, *so* shall thy sons marry thee: and *as* the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, *so* shall thy God rejoice over thee.
- **Psa 45** was widely regarded as Messianic by the Jewish sages (Edersheim, *Life and Times*, Appendix 9). V.2 in the Targum begins, “Thy beauty, king Messiah, ...” The psalm goes on to describe the marriage of this royal figure.

2. The church as the bride of Christ

- The Baptist appears to have introduced the concept in the NT.
 - **John 3:29** is the earliest reference chronologically.
 - The Lord picks up the theme in addressing the disciples of John in **Matthew 9:15**, which appears to follow the healing of the Gadarene demoniac: “And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.”
- Paul develops it more fully:
 - **2 Corinthians 11:2** For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present *you as* a chaste virgin to Christ.
 - **Ephesians 5:25** Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; ²⁶ That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.
- Revelation picks up the eschatological theme, merging the OT and NT threads together.
 - **Revelation 19:7** Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. ⁸ And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. ⁹ And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed *are* they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.
 - **Revelation 21:9** And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.

John introduces the metaphor with three roles.

- Following the OT imagery, “the bride” must be, in the first instance, the people of Israel. The crowds that flocked first to the Baptist and now are following Jesus are the bride of the heavenly bridegroom.
- The Baptist applies the role of “bridegroom to the Lord Jesus, which shows once again the high christology that he supports. We saw this already in his mention of the Lord’s pre-

existence in 1:15, 30. Now we see it in his assignment to the Lord of the role of Jehovah in the OT marriage metaphor.”

- What does that make John? He takes for himself the role of “friend of the bridegroom,” roughly equivalent to our “best man.” The closest biblical parallel to this position are the guests at Samson’s wedding in Judg 14:11.

In this framework, he argues that it is the bridegroom, not the best man, who has the right to possess the bride. The friend of the bridegroom finds his satisfaction, not in enjoying the devotion of the bride, but in seeing the bride devote herself to the bridegroom. The best man’s job is not to perpetuate his own role, but hasten its completion by bringing the bride and the bridegroom together.

Calvin of Christian ministers: “they who draw the Church to themselves rather than to Christ are guilty of basely violating the marriage which they ought to have honored. And the greater the honor which Christ confers on us, by making us the guardians of his spouse, so much the more heinous is our want of fidelity, if we do not endeavor to maintain and defend his right.”

29b-30, Personal Response.—So John’s “joy ... is fulfilled” as the Lord is made manifest as the bridegroom. The very news of Christ’s growing popularity that dismayed John’s disciples, brings him joy, because it indicates that he has been successful in pointing people toward the Messiah.

“He must increase, but I must decrease” is an eloquent statement of the objective that every believer should have in our daily life: that Christ might grow in prominence and recognition, and that we might fade out of the picture as his glory increases. Even Christ’s own disciples had trouble with this concept; compare James and John seeking positions of prominence in his kingdom, Matt 20:21.

The Greek verb “increase” is especially prominent in Genesis (30% of the biblical uses; no other book has more than 6%), where it predominates in expressions of the form “be fruitful.” Perhaps the Baptist’s testimony here carries on the theme of the new creation, in which the one thing that is to flourish and predominate over all others is the Son of God. He must be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. This agricultural metaphor for the spread of Messiah’s glory has a precedent in Psa 72:15-17.

31a he that cometh from above is above all.—I take this as being the Baptist’s concluding statement.

- “He that cometh” is the Baptist’s term for Jesus (1:15, 27).
- “from above” is another way of stating his deity, which John has already acknowledged in his preexistence (1:15,27) and by granting him the title of the heavenly bridegroom.
- “above all,” and therefore far above the Baptist, explaining why it is just that Jesus should increase and the baptist should decrease.

With this last clause, compare

- Rom 9:5, “Christ, who is over all”;
- Eph 1:21, “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named”;
- Phil 2:9, “God hath highly exalted him.”

John 3

John is right not to be envious of the Lord's increasing popularity. The Lord is "above all," the supreme authority and power in all the universe.

This phrase is reminiscent of the ambiguity in "lifted up" in v.14. While John uses the phrase unmistakably to refer to the crucifixion, its more general sense is "exalted." The one who is lord over all was humbled to bear our sins, but then highly exalted in view of his obedience to the Father. Thus the Baptist's testimony ends on a parallel point to the Lord's.

John's attitude is appropriate for us today. Paul captured this in Gal 2:20, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. Compare Mrs. Whiddington's 19th century hymn, "Not I but Christ."

Not I, but Christ, be honored, loved, exalted;
 Not I, but Christ, be seen, be known, be heard;
 Not I, but Christ, in every look and action;
 Not I, but Christ, in every thought and word.

Oh, to be saved from myself, Dear Lord
 And to be lost in thee.
 Oh, that it may be no more I,
 But Christ that lives in me.

31b-36, The Evangelist's Commentary

The shift from the Baptist to the Evangelist is marked by

- Shift of references to the Baptist from first person ("I must decrease") to third person ("he that is of the earth...");
- Echoes of language from the first half of the chapter, of which the Evangelist, but not the Baptist, has knowledge.

The commentary falls into three parts, each with strong affinities to the previous half of John 3.

3:11-21	3:31-36-
11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen ; and ye receive not our witness . 12 If I have told you earthly things , and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things ? 13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven , even the Son of man which is in heaven.	31b he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth : he that cometh from heaven is above all . 32 And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth ; and no man receiveth his testimony .
14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up : 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish , but have eternal life .	33 He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true. 34 For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him. 35 The Father loveth the Son , and hath given all things into his hand.
3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son , that whosoever believeth in him should not	36 He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life : and he that believeth not

<p>perish, but have everlasting life. 17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. 18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.</p>	<p>the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.</p>
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The first portion of the commentary reflects on the distinction between the Baptist and the Messiah, which resides in the difference in their origin. The second amplifies the claim that the Messiah bears testimony to heavenly things, while the third summarizes the consequences to the hearers in view of their response to Messiah's testimony.

31b-32, Origin: Contrast between John and Jesus

The *concept* in this paragraph is drawn from 1:1-8. The *wording* echoes 3:11-13. The evangelist is amplifying the Lord's words to Nicodemus to contrast Jesus and John in terms of their origin. Note the parallel between the two, in terms of origin and speech.

(I am taking the first sentence in 31 as spoken by the Baptist, the culmination of his confession, and the starting point for the commentator, just as the Lord's last statement in 14-15 is the starting point for the evangelist's comments in 16ff.)

He that is of the earth.—This is John's role, and that of all the prophets. Only the Lord Jesus could claim to have his origin in heaven (3:13).

Speaketh of the earth.—There is nothing wrong with speaking from an earthly perspective; our Lord did that in the first part of his interview with Nicodemus (cf. 3:12). But it is limited, compared with the revelation available through the Son of God.

He that cometh from heaven.—From v.13, this can only be a reference to the Lord Jesus, and to the prophecy of Prov 30:4. Note the shift from "from above" in 31a, probably spoken by the Baptist, to "from heaven" here, quoting the Lord's words to Nicodemus, known to the Evangelist but not to the Baptist.

32, that he testifieth.—That is, "he that cometh down from heaven." This phrase thus answers to "speaketh of the earth," and corresponds to v.12, "tell you of heavenly things." The revelation available to us through the Lord Jesus is much greater than that given by any earthly prophet, because he can testify first-hand of what is in heaven. Compare Heb 1:1,2.

No man receiveth his testimony.—Compare v.11, "he receive not our witness" (where the Greek words for "testimony" and "witness" are identical). Our Lord is superior to John in three ways:

1. His origin (from heaven, rather than from the earth);
2. His authority (above all);
3. His testimony (based on first-hand knowledge of what is in heaven).

In spite of his superior origin, authority, and testimony, remarkably, "no man receiveth his testimony." The quantitative claim here can be understood in two ways:

1. As a generalization (thus Calvin: “When he says that “no man receiveth his testimony,” he means that there are very few and almost no believers, when compared with the vast crowd of unbelievers”).
2. As an absolute truth, apart from the work of the Spirit of God. Thus v.3, v. 27, and 1 Cor 2:14.

People have available to them the greatest possible authority on spiritual things. Remarkably, they discard it, for reasons that John has already explained in 19-21. They are ashamed for their sin to be made known.

33-35, Source of the Son’s Testimony

This paragraph amplifies the claim of 32 that the one from heaven bears witness of heavenly things. We have a summary statement and then three arguments for it.

33, he that hath received ... hath set to his seal.—Though in the flesh “no man receiveth,” yet by the grace of God a few do (the Baptist among them, and probably in view here). One who does receive this testimony is agreeing, not just with Jesus, but with God.

The word order is important: “God” comes first. Compare 2 Cor 1:18 “God is true” *pistos de ho qeos*, or Rom 3:4 “let God be true” *ginesqw de ho qeos al8q8s*, cf. Rev 15:3; 16:7. The result is to put the emphasis on God. “It is God whom you are calling true, not some lesser authority.” Thus the point of the verse is to assert that by agreeing with *Jesus*, we are agreeing with *God*.

The flip side of this verse is 1 John 5:10, “he who does not believe God has made him a liar.”

Now we have three arguments for the claim that the Son’s testimony is nothing less than the very Word of God.

34, he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God.—This claim would be true of any prophet, but it is true nevertheless. A messenger speaks on behalf of the one who has sent him.

- The OT prophets regularly proclaimed, “Thus saith the Lord.”
- Paul claims in the NT, “the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:37).
- He commends the Thessalonians, “when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God,” 1 Thes 2:13.
- To despise the word of the messenger is to despise the one who sent him. Thus when Hanun despised the messengers whom David sent in 2 Sam 10, David took the affront personally.
- Our Lord instructed all his disciples, “He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me” (Luke 10:16).

God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him.—Now the Evangelist narrows the scope a bit. He is alluding to a Jewish proverb, recorded in Lev. Rabbah 15:

"Says R. Joden bar R. Simeon, even the waters which descend from above are not given, but, *bemidah*, "in measure".--Says R. Acha, even the Holy Spirit, which dwells upon the prophets, does not dwell, but, *bemi\$kal*, "in weight"."

Even under the new covenant, no one person has all of the gifts, but they are given by "measure," Eph 4:7.

This limitation of the gift of the Spirit to God's servants opens the door to the possibility of error. Even when God sends a messenger, the messenger might fail to deliver the message properly. Not so with our Lord. He has received the Holy Spirit without measure, and his word is thus completely and without reserve the Word of God.

35 The Father loveth the Son.—John will take us one step further. What is the origin of this extraordinary gift of the Spirit that the Son, alone among all who God has sent, enjoys? It is not some administrative decision or bureaucratic allocation, but lies in the deep love that the Father has for the Son. This messenger is exceptionally dear to the one who has sent him.

He ... hath given all things into his hand.—The messenger enjoys not only the complete gift of the Spirit, but all other authority from the father. Compare the status of Isaac as reported by Abraham's servant to Laban: "unto him hath he given all that he hath," Gen 24:36. Once again, we hear echoes of the "lifted up" of v.14 and the "above all" of 32.

Here, then, is a threefold assurance that what the Son says is the Word of the Father. He is sent by the Father, sent with the full endowment of the Spirit, sent with the Father's love and with authority over all the Father's possessions. Indeed, one who receives his (Christ's) testimony is attesting to the truth not just of the word of Man, but of God.

36, Consequences of Belief or Rejection

As in the first half of the chapter, so here, John gently but firmly introduces the consequences of rejecting this revelation. The wording recalls 3:16-18.

He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.—This is the promise of 3:16. Note the present tense of both verses.

- The "believing" is present and ongoing, not some action at some point in the past. There is no ground here for the notion that once someone has raised a hand at a meeting, signed a pledge card, or even been baptized, they are home free. True belief continues throughout life.
- Similarly, the possession of everlasting life is present and ongoing, not some vague hope for the future. Everlasting life does not begin when we die. It begins now.

He that believeth not the Son.—A different verb, literally, "disobeyeth." John highlights here the authority that the Father has given the Son. It is not just a matter of giving assent to what he says as a messenger, but to obeying his word as the sovereign Lord. This verse gives the lie to "easy believism," and any notion that one can be saved without holiness and godliness of life.

Shall not see life.—Compare the Lord's words to Nicodemus in 3:3. One who rejects the Lord's authority not only does not have life, but can't even see it, can't experience it in any way.

the wrath of God abideth on him.—Not "cometh on him." The wrath of God has been on him all along, and it stays there. The default condition of the human race is condemnation. We are

John 3

born under the shadow of the wrath of God. Psa 58:3, “The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.” That is why we could not climb up to God by our good works, but must rely on his gracious intervention to save us by sending his son.

Summary of John 3

We have seen a contrast of two people in their response to the Lord.

- Nicodemus came in pride and condescension, recruiting the Lord to the Pharisaic party.
- John came in humility, sending away his own disciples to follow the Lord.

In both episodes, we are reminded that we can do nothing to help ourselves. Nicodemus hears the Spirit compared to the sovereign wind and water. John reminds his disciples that a man can receive nothing unless it is given him from above.

The evangelist offers the same summary to each episode. We must choose whether to accept or to reject the heavenly witness borne by the Son of God. Those who accept his witness will be delivered from their natural lost condition, while those who reject it will abide under the wrath of God that is the natural lot of all people from birth.