

The Gospel of John

Lesson 5: He Must Increase: John's Final Witness -- John 3:22-36

Success can be one of the most dangerous things that ever happens to a person, and John the Baptist is about to face it from the other direction. His disciples come to him rattled, almost indignant. The teacher they have followed is losing ground. The crowds that once streamed out to the Jordan are now drifting toward Jesus. "Rabbi," they say, "he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." You can hear the anxiety underneath. Our numbers are down. Our influence is fading. Something must be done.

And John says one of the most beautiful and most freeing things any servant of God has ever said. He does not panic. He does not compete. He does not scramble to protect his platform. He smiles and says, in effect, this is exactly how it is supposed to be. "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven." He compares himself to the friend of the bridegroom, the best man, whose entire joy is to hear the groom's voice and step aside so the wedding can happen. "He must increase," John says, "but I must decrease." And there is no bitterness in it at all. There is joy.

That single sentence may be the cleanest definition of a healthy spiritual life ever spoken. He must increase, but I must decrease. It is the opposite of everything the world tells us about building our brand, protecting our turf, and making ourselves bigger. John has discovered the secret that sets a person free: his life was never about him. He was the voice, not the Word; the friend, not the groom. And so when his own influence begins to fade, he does not grieve. His joy is complete, because the One he loves is being honored.

Then John lifts his eyes from himself to Jesus and pours out one final, soaring witness. The One who comes from above is above all. He speaks the words of God and gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. And the chapter ends with the weightiest of stakes: "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's last recorded sermon is not about John at all. It is about Jesus, and it ends with an urgent call to believe and obey the One who must increase. Read it and let it search your own heart about what, and who, you are really living for.

Group Discussion: John the Baptist responded to his shrinking influence with joy rather than jealousy, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (v. 30). Why is it so hard to rejoice when others are honored above us, and what helps a person genuinely celebrate someone else's increase?

Personal Reflection: John found his joy not in his own success but in the success of the One he served. Where do you find your sense of worth and joy most threatened, and what would it look like to root your joy in Christ's honor rather than your own?

Read John 3:22–36

Study Questions

1. When his disciples worried that Jesus was drawing larger crowds, John said, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (v. 27). What does this teach us about how we should view our gifts, roles, and successes?
2. John's disciples were anxious about losing influence to Jesus (v. 26). When have you felt threatened by someone else's success or recognition, and how did you respond? How might this passage reshape that response?
3. John calls himself "the friend of the bridegroom" whose joy is now complete (v. 29). What does this image teach about the proper role and joy of every servant of Christ?
4. John says plainly, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (v. 30). What is one specific area of your life where you sense Jesus calling you to decrease so He can increase?
5. John testifies that "he who comes from above is above all" and "bears witness to what he has seen and heard" (vv. 31–32). What does this teach about the unique authority of Jesus compared to every other teacher or messenger?
6. John says that the one who receives Jesus' testimony "sets his seal to this, that God is true" (v. 33). In what areas of your life are you tempted to doubt that God is true, and what would it look like to trust His word fully there?
7. John says, "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure" (v. 34). What does it mean that Jesus alone received the Spirit without measure, and how does that set Him apart from the prophets who came before Him?
8. John says the Father "has given all things into his hand" (v. 35) because He loves the Son. How does knowing that all things are in the hands of the Son you love change the way you face the things you cannot control?
9. The chapter ends, "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" (v. 36). Notice that John sets "believe" and "obey" in parallel. How does this verse show that genuine, saving faith is an obedient faith, and how would you explain this against the idea that one can be saved by faith with no obedience?
10. Look back over John's final witness. He decreased so Christ could increase, and his joy was complete. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you, through this lesson, into someone whose joy is found in His increase rather than your own?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Philippians 2:3–11, counting others more significant and the self-emptying of Christ; 1 Corinthians 4:7, having nothing we did not receive; Matthew 11:11, Jesus' high praise of John the Baptist; John 1:29–34, John's earlier witness to the Lamb of God; Hebrews 5:8–9, Christ the source of salvation to all who obey Him.