

A Fading Star

John 3:22-36

Introduction

If it were possible to travel back in time, I would love to visit, among other places and events, the palace of Bloody Mary. This was the queen who committed some of the most violent acts toward Christians in the history of Scotland. I would like to visit her courtroom, not to see her, but to hear a preacher, by the name of John Knox, who thundered the truth, even though it might cost him his life.

On one occasion, as Knox was headed to the queen's chapel to preach, he was warned to postpone the visit since she was in one of her dangerous moods.

Knox continued on his way, replying, "Why should I be afraid of a queen, when I have just spent time on my knees with God?"

I would like to travel on to Germany, in the year 1521, and sit in the packed courtroom as Martin Luther, the reformer, stands on trial as a heretic. I would love to have heard, first hand, his words, as he said to the highest and most powerful religious and political leaders of his day, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant. Here I stand. It is all that I can do."

I would love to travel back in time and hear Hugh Latimer preach. He was a reformer who advanced the Protestant Reformation in England, until he was martyred. One sermon that he preached offended Henry VIII, who demanded he preach again and make a public apology. Latimer refused.

It was Hugh Latimer who uttered the famous line that fueled the fires of the young Protestant church. He was about to be burned at the stake for his involvement in the Protestant Reformation. He turned

to Samuel Ridley, who was also about to die in the flames, and said, "Take heart, we shall this day light such a candle in England that I hope will never be put out."

I would also like to travel back in time to a period that could easily be called a reformation. A fiery preacher, suddenly and without much warning, appeared with a message that shocked the highest spiritual and political leaders. It was offensive to their religious senses. The thundering preacher even offended the king as well, with a sermon on moral purity. The king of his day was not named Henry, but Herod.

Now, the time I would like to visit, is not the day John appeared from the wilderness, but the day something very unusual took place. What I would have loved to have seen is that moment when John's disciples came to him with the news that Jesus' ministry was beginning to attract more people than his.

While we cannot be there, we can at least read the account of that conversation. It is a conversation that certainly revealed the true greatness of John the Baptist. It is recorded in the gospel by John, in chapter 3, starting in verse 22.

After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.

Now look at chapter 4, verse 2.

(although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were)

This baptism was identical to John the Baptist's. It was a baptism of repentance that identified the

people with the truth of the prophet's teaching. It was not a believer's baptism, as we know it today, although there are several parallels. We have previously discussed that.

Continue to chapter 3, verses 23 through 25.

And John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and they were coming and were being baptized. For John had not yet been thrown into prison.

(He got there, by the way, because he offended Herod's mistress with his sermon on infidelity.)

There arose therefore a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification.

Now we are not sure how this discussion related, but sometime during this discussion, this cantankerous, unnamed Jew brought up the point that not only was John baptizing, but the disciples of Jesus were baptizing.

"Wait a second. What did you say? Jesus is baptizing in Judea?! This is John's territory and this is John's baptism!"

Now look at verse 26.

And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have borne witness, behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him."

This is the moment that I would love to see, for this moment determines John's greatness. How will he respond?

Well, I will tell you, ahead of time, that he responded with humility. In fact, I want to take the spade to John's words and uncover some wonderful characteristics of humility that should challenge us all as messengers for God.

Characteristic #1

Humility refuses to promote personal achievements

1. The first characteristic of humility, that John displays, is that it refuses to promote personal achievements.

Continue to verse 27 to hear John's initial, immediate response to his disciples.

John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven."

In other words, "What's the fuss? My ministry is from God. I'm nothing more than what God has made me!"

We have a well-known phenomenon in the animal kingdom – sheep in the flock have a butting order, and the hardest head wins; in the hen house, it is a pecking order. In the Christian community, we do not determine importance and stature by who has the hardest skull or who has the sharpest beak, we have our own ranking order. It is order by comparison!

We compare bank books, talents, degrees, looks, clothing, cars, houses, business titles, etc. to come up with our ranking. And, in the ministry, we compare budgets and attendance records. In fact, the problem with John's disciples is not that people still are not coming to hear John preach, but that more are going to hear Jesus!

Note verse 23b again.

. . . and they were coming and were being baptized.

This is by John. There is still a crowd and there are still wonderful results. But then, notice again verse 26b.

. . . all are coming to Him.

Evidently, they had sent a spy or two over to Jesus' camp to count heads. The crowd there was so overwhelming that they exaggerated the report, "John, everybody's going over to Him!"

Look at John's answer again, in verse 27.

John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven."

The effectiveness of anyone's life and ministry is determined ahead of time by God, and given as a gift to that willing servant. This does not mean that you are free to be lazy in your Christian life and then, blame your lack of achievement on God. Believing in the sovereignty of God does not mean that we can be lazy, but it does mean that, whatever the results of our efforts, we will see God's hand in them and will not be jealous of another person, whom God may have chosen to be more effective!

As Elizabeth Browning wrote, "All service ranks the same with God."

There are two differing attitudes among believers:

- “I am entitled,” or
- “I have been entrusted.”

What a difference in the body of Christ the second attitude would make. We are what we are because of God’s design. We are talented and gifted by God’s design. And, God has placed us together for the benefit of each other.

Turn to I Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 7, where Paul picks up the same theme. It seems that he is even quoting John the Baptist.

For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast . . .

And if you have ever wondered why God equipped you the way He did, Paul expands further in chapter 12, verse 12.

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body . . .

Skip to verses 15 through 17, where Paul illustrates.

If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body, . . . If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

Just picture that – a body with one huge ear and no sense of smell, nor sight, nor taste. It would probably hear great, but, without the other parts of the body, it could not walk, or, if it could, it would constantly bump into things, and it could not eat, etc.

Then, in verse 18, Paul makes the point.

But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

So stop trying to be a hand, if you are a foot; stop trying to be a mouth, if you are an ear! The church needs to catch on to this truth.

One of the things that made John truly great was that he was committed to being a star, and not the sun. He was the voice and not the truth. He was

committed to being himself, under the direction of God’s leading and design.

Now, I want you to imagine being deep in the forest and stumbling upon a group of small animals. They are all seated in straight rows and, up front, there is a loud, boisterous rabbit holding a clipboard and giving a speech. He is obviously in charge or, at least, no one can interrupt him to object. You decide to listen in and soon discover that the rabbit is giving the animals a list of qualities that make an animal truly outstanding.

You hear him say, “Now if you want to be a truly great animal, you must run fast and learn to hop.”

There is a duck in the crowd, who loudly objects, “Hey, what about swimming or flying?”

“Swim!” the rabbit laughs, “Who needs to swim? Who likes to swim? And flying . . . truly great animals keep their feet on solid ground!”

So the duck, along with all the other animals, begin to practice running and hopping. Poor duck, he just cannot get it right. In fact, whenever he picks up speed, his back end swings so fast that it bowls him over. And he can never seem to get the hopping down, unless he flaps his wings, but then it is not a real hop, like the rabbit does.

So eventually, discouraged, the duck waddles back to the pond. As he is gliding gracefully across the water, you hear him say, “I guess I’ll never be a truly great animal.”

We have, in our audience, a lot of ducks. We have some rabbits too. We also have some sparrows, eagles, and butterflies. And, we have a lot of trouble, if we all start trying to look like a rabbit, by running fast with little hops.

God purposefully chose not to make us like General Motors makes Buicks. We do not all have the same ability, intelligence, or gifts. In fact, to wish to be like someone else is to discredit the wisdom of God, Who formed and outfitted you, Who knit your parts together.

So, instead of trying to learn how to hop, or swim, or run, try two other activities instead.

Activity #1 – Be thankful!

1. The first activity is to be thankful!

Thank God for the way He designed you. You are an original! From your persona to your physique, you have been fashioned by divinely devised DNA.

I remember, as a junior high school boy, being upset that I was not bigger and stronger. Besides, Frankie, who lived down the street, was the neighborhood bully and he terrorized me and all the other kids. So, I bought a can of powder from the nutrition store – the one with the picture on the front of the man with huge biceps and a beautiful woman on either side of him. That was what I was missing in life. My mom even went along and made milkshakes for me that I would mix that sawdust with. I never gained a pound!

The trouble is, many people never outgrow that uncertainty. So, they spend thousands of dollars on sports equipment, or fast cars, or designer label clothing to somehow measure up!

Take a look at your thumbprint, it is the only one like it in the world. It is as if God is trying to communicate a message that you are special and distinct from everyone else.

Activity #2 – Be realistic!

2. The second activity is to be realistic!

God created us less than ideal. No one is intellectually or physically perfect. Perhaps God is trying to teach us that the inside is more important than the outside. In fact, has it ever occurred to you that your outward imperfections are a reminder of God's priorities? He is concerned with the qualities of character.

If you can hop or run, you cannot take credit for it; if you cannot swim, you cannot take the blame. If all you can do is waddle, then waddle to the glory of God. If you can soar, or run and hop, or swim, then do it with everything you have got. And, develop it, refine it, and use it for God's glory. Above all, remember Who gave you that particular expertise.

I happen to believe that, one day, we will probably be amazed at the variety of people to whom God will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

He will not say,

- "Well done thou brilliant servant!"
- "Well done thou educated servant!"
- "Well done thou attractive and wealthy servant!"

- "Well done thou flawless, perfect servant!"

No. God will say, "Well done, thou faithful servant!"

In other words, "You have been faithful with what I've given to you to use for my name's sake."

Now go back to John, chapter 3. I have taken you on quite a side trail! Let us move on and look at more of the characteristics of humility that John gives us.

Characteristic #2

Humility refuses to emphasize personal importance

2. The second characteristic of humility, that John shows, is that it refuses to emphasize personal importance.

Look at chapter 3, verse 28.

You yourselves bear me witness that I said, "I am not the Christ," but, "I have been sent before Him."

In other words, John is saying to his disciples, "C'mon, fellas, don't forget who I'm not!"

And they are saying, "C'mon, John, don't sell yourself short. Take a look around you . . . and have you forgotten the angel?"

Since we probably have forgotten the angel, turn back to Luke, chapter 1, verses 13 through 17.

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great . . .

(There is the word – he is going to be great!)

. . . in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine or liquor; and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

“You have forgotten that John – you’re great!
And your ministry is having a three-fold impact –

- a restoration of the family,
- a revival of rebellious people, and
- a re-focusing of an entire nation for the coming Messiah.

That’s what’s happening John!”

And John quietly says, “Pull up some chairs,
fellas, and let me give you a different perspective.”

Return to John, chapter 3, verse 29.

He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. And so this joy of mine has been made full.

In John’s day, in the middle East, it was customary for the friend of the bridegroom (we call him the best man), to make all the arrangements for the wedding. He was the master of ceremonies and, for a time, everyone listened to his direction and obeyed his orders. His final act, which was primarily ritual, was to stand by the door of the bridal chamber, where the marriage would be consummated, and make sure that no one went in to meet the bride except the bridegroom. So he stood by the door until, at an appointed time, the bridegroom came. He then stepped aside; his duties were finished.

John says, “For a time, everyone has been listening to me. But remember, I’ve just been making preparations for the nation – the bride – to meet the bridegroom – the Messiah. I hear His voice. Now that He is here, it is time to step aside with joy.”

That leads me to the third, and perhaps most difficult, characteristic of humility.

Characteristic #3

Humility refuses to preserve personal recognition

3. The third characteristic of humility, that John exemplifies, is that it refuses to preserve personal recognition.

Look at verse 30.

He must increase, but I must decrease.

This literally means, “He must keep on increasing, and I must keep on decreasing.”

A star shines brightly in the darkness, but then, as the sunlight begins to bathe the horizon, the star begins to fade. It is still there, but its reflection is no longer needed. John is a fading star!

Here is the opportunity for John to feel injured, forgotten, or discarded! And, John’s disciples did not like to see their leader overshadowed. They were implying, “Look, John, say something to make Him stop.”

It is interesting that the opposite of a humble Christian is a one who loses sight of what he is supposed to do.

This is like a preacher, who is preaching on the subject of the rapture, and, in the middle of his sermon, Jesus appears in the clouds to rapture the church – and the preacher gets upset that his sermon was interrupted!

It is like a corporate headhunter, upset that his clients are landing jobs; or a baker, that his bread keeps on getting eaten; or a builder, upset that people buy the homes he builds; or a painter, that his paintings are being purchased. Foolish? Yes. Why? Because that is the aim of their occupation!

Here are John’s disciples, whose job is to introduce people to Jesus, upset that people are following Jesus! Pride does ridiculous things!

Now, the ministry of John and Jesus evidently overlapped. Why did John continue baptizing? I believe that was because God had given him his work and he would continue to do it until God called him to do something else. In a short while, his new calling would be manifested – he would be imprisoned by Herod and martyred.

But, when John’s disciple’s come to him, he humbly continues on to say, in effect, “Did somebody mention Jesus? Let me tell you about the Messiah.”

John does not lose this opportunity and he immediately launches into his favorite subject – the Messiah.

John declares two things about Christ.

Jesus is an eyewitness

1. The first is that Jesus is an eyewitness account.

Look at verses 31 and 32a.

He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and

speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. What He has seen and heard, of that He bears witness . . .

You may remember, from a previous study, the emphasis on the word “witness,” in John, chapter 1. Seven times, in that chapter, John is referred to as being a witness.

Do you remember what makes a good witness? It is someone who stands up and tells what he has heard. What makes a perfect witness? It is someone who stands up and tells what he has seen. An eyewitness has the strongest case in court!

This is where John, a terrific, faithful witness, cannot match the witness of Jesus Christ! It is like the difference between speaking to an audience through an interpreter and speaking to them in their own language.

Go back to verse 32 and continue to verse 33.

What he has seen and heard, of that He bears witness; and no man receives His witness. He who has received His witness has set his seal to this, that God is true.

John said, in effect, “I can tell you some things about God’s truth, and I can tell you about the Kingdom of Heaven, but I’ve never been there and I’ve never seen God.”

When you hear Jesus talking about:

- Adam and Eve and the garden of Eden – He was there!
- Noah and the flood – He saw it happen!
- Abraham, Isaiah, David, or Daniel – He had watched them!
- The future and building a church – He, Who had not been confined to our space-time dimension, had already seen the beginning and the completion of the church age!
- Heaven and his Father’s mansion – He had just come from there!

Jesus is an eyewitness!!!

Jesus is an authority

2. The second thing, that John declares about Jesus, is that He is an eternal authority.

Look at verses 34 through 36.

For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

John says “If you think my ministry has had authority, I’m introducing to you the Master. He speaks the words of God. He is part of the divine trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has eternal authority!”

But what of John the Baptist? Jesus said that no one of human descent was greater than John.

Jewish historians estimate that more than 300,000 people followed this man’s ministry. He had generated so much excitement that many were calling him the re-appearance of Elijah.

And now, the star is fading. Why? Because the Son is appearing on the horizon of human history. The curtains are closing on the illustrious career of a courageous, humble man. And, it is a funny thing, he has absolutely no regrets.

Once, when J. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary pioneer to China, was visiting Australia, he was scheduled to speak in a large church in Melbourne. The pastor introduced Hudson Taylor by using many superlatives, especially the word “great”.

Taylor stepped to the pulpit and quietly said, “Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master.”

Like Hudson Taylor, John the Baptist was a man who was content to come in second place. And we honor him, as Christ honored him. There is coming a kingdom where we will be given positions of honor – to those who have played second string well; who, with great passion, have filled the roles of a supporting cast; who have finished second with grace; whose primary desire is not to be served, not to feel the blaze of the spotlight, but to point the spotlight to “the Witness,” the Lamb, the King of Kings, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Make me a servant, Humble and meek.

Lord let me lift up, Those who are weak;

And may the prayer of heart always be;

Make me a servant, make me a servant, make me a servant today.

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