He must become greater; I must become less

John 3:22-36

Key Verse: 3:30 “He must become greater; I must become less.”

 It is important for us to know who we are and for what purpose we are sent. John the Baptist knew who he was and for what purpose he was sent from God. In the previous chapters John identified himself as a voice of one calling in the desert who prepared the way for the Lord Jesus. He testified that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). John also said that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit. John preached the message of repentance by baptizing those who came to him. He did all this so that the people might accept Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God.

 In today’s passage we learn from another of John’s testimonies about Jesus. Let us see what he is going to tell us about Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem and went into the Judean countryside, where Jesus had spent some time with them, and baptized others. They must have been by the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was also baptizing people. According to John 4:1-2, it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. At that time John the Baptist was also baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. (23) We don’t know exactly where Aenon was located, but it must have had many springs of water for baptism. Look at verse 25. “***An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing***.” It is not clear whether this dispute arose because of John’s baptism or about traditional ceremonial washing. At that time, some devoted Jews bathed daily in cold water for ceremonial washing. Baptism was often performed for the gentiles who were regarded as unclean, not for Jews. John’s disciples 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***.” (26) The disciples of John were much concerned about the rising of Jesus’ popularity. They must have had a competition with the disciples of Jesus, thinking, “Who is greater, your master or my teacher?” “Whose ministry is more popular, yours or ours?” and so on.

 What was John’s answer? Look at verses 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***.’” According to the flow of the conversation between John and his disciples, ‘a person’ indicates John the Baptist himself. John knew who he was. He knew that he was not the Messiah even though his popularity reached sky high. He knew that he was sent ahead of the Messiah to prepare the way for Jesus. John knew that his mission was waning while Jesus’ ministry was rising. He came to realize that God’s call and his gifts from heaven were now sufficient for him. He didn’t become defensive about the decrease of his ministry. He simply testified who Jesus is.

 John’s answer teaches us what kind of attitude we should have as servants of God and as preachers for Christ. It is humility. John humbled himself to exalt the name of Jesus. John could have exalted himself through his popularity if he wanted. But he humbled himself as a forerunner for the Messiah Jesus. He knew that he became who he was only by God’s grace. The Apostle Paul urged the saints in Rome concerning humility in Romans 12:3. “*For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you*.” When people forget God’s grace, they become proud. They think of themselves as better than others and look down on them. They boast about what they have, and they despise those who do not have. But John the Baptist was humble even though he had more spiritual gifts and power than others did. He made himself nothing before Christ. He knew who he was. It is very important for us to know who we are before Christ. As Paul confessed in 1 Corinthians 15:9,10, we must also confess like him, “*For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them---yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*”Amen!

 Look at verse 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***.” John compared himself to a friend of the bridegroom and Jesus to the bridegroom. In a wedding ceremony, a friend of the bridegroom, called a ‘best man’, organizes the program and presides over the ceremony. A best man also entertains the guests as much as he can before the bridegroom appears. He wants to praise the bridegroom so that people may become more eager to see the bridegroom. When he hears the voice of the bridegroom, the friend is full of joy. He is ready to introduce the bridegroom and presides over the happy wedding. John the Baptist compared himself to the best man of Jesus. He was full of joy when Jesus was working as the Messiah. He was happy when he prepared the way for the Lord Jesus. His joy was complete when he saw Jesus coming to him. What John said reminds us of Jesus’ words in John 4:36-37, which says, “*Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvesters a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true*.” John sows and Jesus reaps. Their joy was complete.

Verse 30 teaches John the Baptist’s final testimony about Jesus. ***“He must become greater; I must become less***.” What can we learn from John’s final testimony about Jesus? Humility? Yes, humility. We must accept Jesus as the Lord of our lives. He must become greater and I must become less. His influence and words may increase and my words and thoughts may decrease. Let’s put Jesus in the center of our lives and let him rule over us, control our plans, thoughts, and feelings. In a word, we must live Christ-centered lives, not self-centered lives. Jesus is our king and we are his subjects. He is the bridegroom and we are the bride. Those who accept Jesus’ kingship over their lives are great and humble men. Those who exercise their own kingship over their lives are petty and proud men.

What else? What can we learn from verse 30? It teaches us the purpose for our lives. John the Baptist lived to reveal the name of Jesus. In 1:31 he said, “*I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.*” What should be the answer of those who received the grace of God when they are asked about the purpose of their lives? It is to reveal the name of Jesus in us and through us. Paul said in Romans 1:5, “*Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship*…” While we were still sinners, Jesus died for us and paid the price of our sins on the cross. He rose again from the dead and opened the way for us to enter the kingdom of God. Through him we have eternal life. If someone died in your place, what can you do for them? You should live for their name’s sake for the rest of your life as an expression of your gratitude. To reveal the name of Jesus is John’s testimony and our lifelong purpose.

Who is Jesus whom we must reveal to the world? Now John the Apostle, not John the Baptist, answers this question in verses 31-33. “***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.*** ***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.***” John the Apostle said that Jesus is the one who came from heaven and that he is above all. He meant that Jesus is the Son of God who came from heaven to this world to speak about the kingdom of heaven. People may assume many things about Alaska; its weather, people, mountains and fields. But their testimonies cannot compare to those of the one who lived and came from there. Jesus talked about the kingdom of God. But people didn’t accept his testimony because their hearts were evil. But those who accept Jesus’ testimony come to realize that God is truthful because Jesus’ message about the kingdom of heaven is true.

In this world there are many atheists, skeptics, and agnostics who will not accept our testimony about God’s existence and his kingdom. The Bible says that they cannot know God through their own wisdom. (1 Co 1:21) We all came from the earth. We cannot know the one who came from heaven through human reasoning or earthly science. We come to know God only through faith. Faith is the password to open windows to see God and his kingdom. Hebrews 11:3 says, “*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*” When we accept Jesus’ word and his testimony by faith, we know the truth and the truth will set us free. (John 8:31,32)

In verses 34,35 John the Apostle testifies who Jesus is. Look at verses 34,35. “***For the one whom God sent speaks the words of God, for God gave the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands***.” Jesus was sent from God. He speaks the words of God. God gives the Holy Spirit without limit through Jesus. The Father loves the Son and gave all authorities to him over all creation. In a word Jesus is the Son of God who came from the Father to teach us the words of God and to baptize us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus the Son of God, who has authority over the whole world, commanded his disciples to become his witness to the ends of the earth. (Mt 28:20, Ac 1:8)

What is the message which his disciples must preach to this world? It is the gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Look at verse 36. “***Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.***” God’s message is his love for this perishing world and eternal life through his Son Jesus Christ. Whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life. There is no discrimination in salvation. Anyone who accepts Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior will be saved. But to those who reject Jesus will be condemned. God’s wrath remains on them. Those who reject Jesus must account for their sins because they rejected God’s way of pardon for their sins. If someone does not pay money for bail, they have to go to jail. If someone does not pay the price for your sins, you must pay the price for your sins, which is death. (Ro 6:23b)

Let us read verse 36 again. Let us accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior so that we may have eternal life. Let us live to reveal the name of Jesus and to glorify his name throughout our lifetime. As John the Baptist said, “*He must become greater; I must become less*.” Receive Jesus into the center of your life and let him rule you and control your thoughts and feelings so that his love and his influence may increase in you. Let him become greater in you and you become less, as John the Baptist said. Amen.