

**The Gospel of John (22);
“The True Bridegroom and the Friend of the Bridegroom”**

Introduction:

It is our intention today to move into a new section of our Gospel, which we have entitled, “**The True Bridegroom, and the Friend of the Bridegroom.**” But before we do so, we need to complete our consideration of the final paragraph of the portion of John’s Gospel which we have called, “**Jesus, the Brazen Serpent, and Saving Faith.**” Here is **John 3:18-21**:

¹⁸He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.

We considered briefly verse 18 last Lord’s Day. There is a shift of emphasis reflected here. To this point the writer had been speaking principally regarding “the world”, but here he begins to speak to “the one”, the individual. There is a directness, an individual application to everyone who reads and hears these words. The Lord here addresses “he who believes” and also addresses “he who does not believe.” This verse declares that the one who is believing in the Lord Jesus is no longer in a condemned state before God. The one who has not believed continues in the state of God’s condemnation, having failed to resort to the only remedy God provides for sinners. Each of us is in one of these two classes of people. Although we may remain somewhat hidden or obscure when we consider ourselves a part of the entire world, the gospel speaks to us as individuals. There is individual accountability before God. “The soul that sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). But the soul that believes on Jesus Christ lives and shall live forever.

Here the verb, “believes”, is in the present tense, as it is throughout this passage. It describes not a onetime confession of faith, but a *continual* faith in the Lord Jesus that is characteristic of all true Christians.

The present was the tense of choice most likely because the New Testament writers by and large saw *continual* belief as a necessary condition of salvation. Along these lines, it seems significant that the *promise* of salvation is almost always given to ὁ πιστεύων (*ho pisteuon*, i.e. the one who believes).¹

The believing one is not condemned; that is, he does not lie under God’s condemnation. Here the forgiveness of sins is not directly stated, but it is certainly evident. “Although John does not explicitly appeal to Paul’s ‘justification by faith’ doctrine, the substance of the matter is found here.”²

The believer is not condemned now nor shall he ever be condemned, even on the final Day of Judgment, when all people will be judged according to their works. The believer will “stand” in the Day of Judgment”, for his sins shall be covered by the blood of Jesus Christ from condemning scrutiny. This is in contrast to the wicked who “will not stand in the judgment”, nor will sinners stand “in the congregation of the righteous” (Psa. 1:5). The one believing on Jesus Christ will not be condemned on that great Day even when his thoughts, his words, his actions are examined; thank the Lord.

However, it is the very sad state of all those who do not believe on Jesus Christ that they are “already condemned.” **Verse 18b** reads, “*but he who does not believe is condemned already.*” He was condemned

¹ Daniel B. Wallace, **Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics; An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament** (Zondervan, 1996), p. 621.

² Donald A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 207.

beforehand and he remains condemned because had he believed on the Lord Jesus, he would have passed out of his state of condemnation into a state of grace before the Lord.

Already in need of a Saviour before God's Son comes on his saving mission, this person compounds his or her guilt by not believing in the name of that Son. As with the arrogant critic who mocks a masterpiece, it is not the masterpiece that that is condemned, but the critic. There is no need to await the final day of judgment (though it will come, 5:26-29): the person who disbelieves in the Father's one and only Son *stands condemned already*, and God's wrath remains on him (3:36). Thus the potential for condemnation is bound up with the mission of the Son to bring salvation.³

The state of God's condemnation remains and continues on any and all who fail or refuse to believe on Jesus. The entire human race is condemned, being under the wrath of God. Only through believing on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is this state of condemnation removed and salvation from sin is obtained, in which the believer is granted forgiveness of sin and the gift of righteousness. As one wrote,

But he that believes not the doctrine of Christ, and does not on the terms of the gospel receive him for his Saviour, is already condemned for his obstinate infidelity, which is the certain cause of damnation: as we say of one mortally wounded, that he is as a dead man, though he breathes for a while; and we speak in the same manner of a malefactor, convicted and attainted of a capital crime, though the sentence be not executed; because their death is inevitable. The not believing in the only Son of God, who is able to save to the utmost all that regularly trust in him, is such contempt of the merciful, all-sufficient, and sole means of salvation, that it is absolutely necessary, and most just, that all those who refuse to be saved by him, should perish by themselves.⁴

Verse 19 describes the reason for their condemnation. "*And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*" Men are sinners. They are described here as lovers of darkness, who prefer darkness to light. We have seen the ideas of darkness and light in the prologue of the Gospel (Cf. 1:5), but here John speaks of the matter more clearly and directly.

The prologue described the darkness of the world, but v. 19 explains it. The world manifested its darkness by its self-love and selfishness, both of which necessarily excluded God, for God should be loved and obeyed. It was only when the love of God came, when "the light" came "into the world," that the darkness saw itself by means of contrast. It was only in the Light that humanity could see that it was in darkness (1:4-5).⁵

Here the "light" is Jesus Christ Himself. We read this earlier in chapter 1.

⁴In Him was life, and the life was the *light* of men. ⁵And the *light* shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the *Light*, that all through him might believe. ⁸He was not that *Light*, but was sent to bear witness of that *Light*. ⁹That was the true *Light* which gives *light* to every man coming into the world. (John 1:4-9)

And then here in John 3:19 men (and women) are said to have "loved darkness rather than light." Because of sin, there is an aversion of people to Jesus Christ. Because they love their sin, they do not and cannot truly love Jesus Christ. **J. C. Ryle** wrote of this cause for man's condemnation:

³ Ibid.

⁴ Matthew Poole, **Commentary on the Holy Bible**, vol. 3 (Hendriksen Publishers, 2008), p. 293.

⁵ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 207.

But the real account of the matter is that men have naturally no will or inclination to use the light. They love their own dark and corrupt ways more than the ways which God proposes to them. They therefore reap the fruit of their own ways, and will have at last what they loved. They loved darkness, and they will be cast into outer darkness. They did not like the light, so they will be shut out from light eternally. In short, lost souls will be what they willed to be, and will have what they loved.⁶

All people everywhere are evil, and they are shown that they are evil when the light of God's truth shines upon them, particularly as that light is shown through Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke to the *Pharisees*, "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, *when you are evil*? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). But the characteristic of being evil was not only true of the Pharisees. Jesus said to His own *disciples*, "*If you then, being evil*, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matt. 7:11). Again, here are Ryle's pertinent comments:

The words, "because their deeds were evil," are very instructive. They teach us that where men have no love to Christ and His Gospel, and will not receive them, their lives and their works will prove at last to have been evil. Their habits of life may not be gross and immoral. They may be even comparatively decent and pure. But the last day will prove them to have been in reality "evil." Pride of intellect, or selfishness, or love of man's applause, or dislike to submission of will, or self-righteousness, or some other false principle will be found to have run through all their conduct. In one way or another, when men refuse to come to Christ, their deeds will always prove to be "evil." Rejection of the Gospel will always be found to be connected with some moral obliquity.⁷ When Christ is refused we may be quite sure that there is something or other in life or heart, which is not right. If a man does not love light his "deeds are evil." Human eyes may not detect the flaw; but the eyes of an all-seeing God do.⁸

Rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals the presence of our evil nature. This reaction and rejection of Christ would characterize each of us if it were not for a work of God's grace in our souls. **Verse 20** declares, "*For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.*" People do not want their sinful condition exposed. They do not want their evil ways to be exposed to others, to themselves, and certainly most of all to God. They love their sin and they love themselves. But they know that in reality their souls are not righteous, but they love that it is so. To come to Christ would expose their deeds, so they choose to stay away from Him and refuse to believe on Him as Lord and Savior.

Such a person is always avoiding the light; i.e. he will have nothing to do with Christ, the source and embodiment of God's truth and love. Hence, he never reads the Bible; refuses to attend church, etc. In his heart he really *hates* the light.⁹

Matthew Henry wrote these words:

Observe, [1] How great the *sin* of unbelievers is; it is aggravated from the dignity of the person they slight; they *believe not in the name of the only-begotten Son of God*, who is infinitely *true*, and deserves to be believed, *infinitely good*, and deserves to be embraced. God sent one to save us that was *dearest* to himself; and shall not he be *dearest to us*? Shall we not believe on his name who has a name above every name? [2] How great the *misery* of unbelievers is: they are *condemned already*; which bespeaks, *first*, a *certain* condemnation. They are as sure to be condemned in the judgment of the great day as if they were condemned already. *Secondly*, a *present* condemnation. The curse has already taken hold of them; the wrath of God now fastens upon them. They are condemned already, for their own hearts condemn them.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 166.

⁷ "Obliquity" means deviation from moral or proper conduct or thought.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ William Hendriksen, **John**, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 143f.

*Thirdly, a condemnation grounded upon their former guilt: He is condemned already, for he lies open to the law for all his sins; the obligation of the law is in full force, power, and virtue, against him, because he is not by faith interested in the gospel defeasance (reversal of sin); he is condemned already, because he has not believed. Unbelief may truly be called the great damning sin, because it leaves us under the guilt of all our other sins; it is a sin against the remedy, against our appeal.*¹⁰

We then read of some who do come to the light. **Verse 21** reads, “*But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.*”

The expression, “does the truth” is somewhat unusual. We usually speak of *believing* the truth, or *knowing* the truth, or *loving* the truth, but here it speaks of “he who *does* the truth.” True faith in Christ is seen in people obeying the truth, even doing the will of Jesus Christ their Lord.

The true Christian shows in his manner and life that his deeds “*have been done in God.*” When one becomes a Christian, especially when he can be compared and contrasted to that which he was and did before, it becomes apparent to him and others that God Himself must be the author and finisher of the work taking place. Salvation is only and wholly due to the grace of God working in the souls of His people to bring them to the Light, to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ. He places in the soul the love for the truth, for the true Light, love for Jesus Christ.

Before we move on from this paragraph, here is a good summation of how these truths affect the Christian and how he views himself and how he views His Savior, Jesus Christ.

It was only when the Light arrived in the darkness that the darkness was exposed as darkness. And the response of the darkness to the Light made manifest its dark quality, for it did not want to be exposed. Ironically, evil is aware of its own shame, and it knows exactly what to do to stay in the dark. As the Light of humanity (1:4), Jesus has exposed the darkness of humanity. While the world speaks naively of “goodness” and “morality,” for the Christian human sinfulness and depravity are the true norm and plumb line of human existence. For this very reason, the Christian does not deny in any way their own sinfulness but wears it as a badge—not for their own honor but as proof of the work of God in one’s life. To speak of goodness or morality without Christ is to speak as a non-Christian; for the Christian is first and foremost a sinner who has been worked on by God. That is, to speak of a general morality is to speak without God and to speak of one’s own honor. The Christian finds their honor and significance in Christ, which means he or she finds acceptance and true identity as a child of God not in spite of their sin but by means of it.¹¹

Let us now turn our attention to **John 3:22-36**, in which we read of “**The True Bridegroom, and the Friend of the Bridegroom.**” This episode, or pericope, contains a typical four part literary structure, which we have spoken about before.¹²

1. The *introduction* of setting of the pericope (vs. 22-24).
2. The setting forth the *conflict* of the pericope, which is a baptism debate (vs. 25-26)
3. The *resolution* of the conflict (vs. 27-30)
4. The *conclusion* and *interpretation* of the event (vs. 31-36)

Within these verses Jesus is once again set forth as fulfilling and surpassing Judaism. The Gospel writer has already shown Jesus to be the One who brings true cleansing from sin. This was set forth in the episode of Jesus changing the water into wine (2:1-11). The writer also set forth Jesus as the true temple, through the episode of Jesus cleansing the temple (2:12-25). And then the writer showed forth Jesus as the one who brings about new life through the new birth (3:1-21). And here, the Gospel writer shows forth Jesus as superior to

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, **Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible**, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 889.

¹¹ This was a summary of this passage entitled “Humanity Exposed” by Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 209.

¹² We addressed the common structure of a pericope in FBC955 on July 28, 2018, when addressing the Wedding in Cana.

John the Baptist and that He was replacing the old order that John the Baptist represented (3:22-36). Therefore, “this is the fourth successive section to point out ways in which Jesus fulfils and surpasses Judaism.”¹³

I. Introduction: The baptizing ministry of Jesus (3:22-24)

²²After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. ²³Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. ²⁴For John had not yet been thrown into prison.

We have pointed out that whereas the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record Jesus’ ministry almost exclusively in Galilee, John’s Gospel records Jesus and His disciples making a number of trips back and forth between Galilee and Judea, as He ministered in both regions. We had just concluded reading of our Lord’s interaction with Nicodemus, which took place in Jerusalem of Judea. Here we read that Jesus and His disciples “came into the land of Judea.” We might assume that this describes yet another journey from Galilee into Judea. But this would not be correct. When the Gospel writer wrote that Jesus and His disciples came into “*the land of Judea*”, he was saying that they left the environs of Jerusalem and traveled into the wilderness areas of Judea, where John the Baptist had been ministering.

Here we read that Jesus was baptizing disciples. We read a little further in the passage that Jesus Himself did not baptize; rather, His disciples baptized new disciples in His presence on His behalf. The writer makes this clarification in John 4:1-3, which read:

Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John ²(though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), ³He left Judea and departed again to Galilee.

Jesus was not only baptizing, but He was spending time with His disciples. They went into the wilderness and “there *He remained with them* and baptized.” Jesus was always making new disciples, but even while he did so, He was discipling further His disciples. The process of learning and growing is a lifetime endeavor. We never fully arrive until we take that step out of the grave into our state of glorification. A church should be concerned about its members growing in maturity, not just growing in numbers through evangelism.

We read that John the Baptist was in that region baptizing. He was “in Aenon near Salim.” It was probably located on the Jordan River almost halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. He was baptized there because “there was much water there.” This is evidence, even strong evidence, that John the Baptist was baptizing people by immersion in the Jordan River. There is no place in the Bible which commands or describes baptizing by the mode of sprinkling. Baptism by immersion is suggested and depicted everywhere. Interestingly, even **John Calvin**, who of course was no Baptist, but baptized by sprinkling, acknowledged that both Jesus and John the Baptist baptized by immersion based on this text. Here are his comments on John 3:22:

It is probable that Christ, when the feast was past, came into that part of Judea which was in the vicinity of the town Enon, which was situated in the tribe of Manasseh. The Evangelist says that there were many waters there, and these were not so abundant in Judea. Now geographers tell us, that these two towns, Enon and Salim, were not far from the confluence of the river Jordan and the brook Jabbok; and they add that Scythopolis was near them. *From these words, we may infer that John and Christ administered baptism by plunging the whole body beneath the water;* though we ought not to give ourselves any great uneasiness about the outward rite, provided that it agree with the spiritual truth, and with the Lord’s appointment and rule.¹⁴

¹³ Donald A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 208.

¹⁴ John Calvin, **Calvin’s Commentaries**, translated by William Pringle, vol. XVII (Baker Book House), pp. 130.

Now John Calvin was a great man and servant of Jesus Christ; he was one of the greatest born of women. And of course Calvin was *right* in this statement that Jesus and John baptized by immersion, as did all of those in the New Testament. And of course Calvin was *wrong* in his statement that “we ought not to give ourselves any great uneasiness about the outward rite.” He had no scriptural license to make that statement. If the Word of God sets forth the mode of baptism as immersion, we would say baptism by any other mode is not biblical baptism. We are not to set aside the commandment of God by the tradition of baptizing by sprinkling.

And so, there was a period of time, of how long a duration we do not know, in which both John the Baptist and Jesus (i.e. His disciples) were baptizing in the Jordan River in the same general region. This is not to set their baptisms as distinct and different from one another. Baptism by both at this early time was a baptism of repentance of sin with view to the impending inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

King Herod had not yet thrown John into prison. That would occur before long. And when that did occur, Jesus and His disciples left once again for the northern region of Galilee. We read this in Mark 1:14f, “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.’”

II. Conflict: the dispute regarding baptism (3:25-26)

We read of the conflict of this pericope in verses 25 and 26. It was not a direct conflict between John’s disciples and Jesus’ disciples, although there was an aspect of this. The conflict was between John’s disciples and certain Jews about “purification.” Actually, the ESV has the better reading that the conflict involved “a Jew”, not “the Jews:” as in the NKJV. Here are verses 25 and 26 from the NKJV:

²⁵Then there arose a dispute between some of John’s disciples and the Jews¹⁵ about purification.

²⁶And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!”

There is no detail as to the exact nature of the conflict other than it was concerning the matter of “purification.” But the conflict sets the stage for John’s response regarding the person of Jesus and His growing prominence.

The Baptist is about to announce what the narrative has already been showing the reader: the Gospel has always been about what God is doing (and Jesus in particular), not the Baptist (who is merely a witness). Thus the reason for mentioning the dispute is to bring to focus on purification, not on the disciples of John or to the unnamed Jew. They, like the reader, are to be directed to the true meaning and source of purification. The Baptist, in what will be his final appearance, is a witness to something other, and for this to be made clearer it is time for his presence to be removed.¹⁶

There were common Jewish practices of baptism with view to the purification of sins. The Essene community at Qumran, which originally stored the Dead Sea scrolls, practiced numerous ritualistic baptisms, even daily washings, believing that they brought about the purification of sins. Perhaps the conflict of some of John’s disciples with this certain Jewish man was a debate of this nature.

It must have unsettled these disciples of John, to learn that the disciples of Jesus were baptizing more disciples than John was baptizing at this time, that the crowds with Jesus were now larger than the crowds with John the Baptist. They said to him, “Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!”

¹⁵ The text should probably read as the ESV, rather than “the Jews” (NKJV), it should read, “a certain Jew.” See Carson, **John**, p. 210.

¹⁶ Klink, p. 217.

His disciples seemed to be concerned about the future or longevity of John's ministry. Their "rabbi", seemed to be diminishing from his prominence of his earlier days. There had been a time not long before then that "all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem" had went out to him and "were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). John was still baptizing, but now Jesus was baptizing more disciples than John.

I appreciated the application that **J. C. Ryle** gave in his commentary on this passage.

We have, firstly, in these verses, *a humbling example of the petty jealousies and party-spirit which may exist among professors of religion* (i.e. professing Christians). We are told, that the disciples of John the Baptist were offended, because the ministry of Jesus began to attract more attention than that of their master...

The spirit exhibited in this complaint, is unhappily common in the Churches of Christ. The succession of these complainers has never failed. There are never wanting (lacking) religious professors (professing Christians) who care far more for the increase of their own party, than for the increase of true Christianity; and who cannot rejoice in the spread of religion, if it spreads anywhere except within their own pale. There is a generation which can see no good doing except in the ranks of its own congregations; and which seems ready to shut men out of heaven, if they will not enter therein under its banner.

The true Christian must watch and pray against the spirit here manifested by John's disciples. It is very insidious, very contagious, and very injurious to the cause of religion. Nothing so defiles Christianity and gives the enemies of truth such occasion to blaspheme, as jealousy and party-spirit among Christians. Wherever there is real grace, we should be ready and willing to acknowledge it, even though it may be outside our own pale. We should strive to say with the Apostle, "If Christ is preached, I rejoice: yea, and will rejoice" (Phil. 1:18). If good is done, we ought to be thankful, though it even may not be done in what we think the best way. If souls are saved, we ought to be glad, whatever be the means that God may think fit to employ.¹⁷

III. Resolution: The Bridegroom and the Friend of the Bridegroom (3:27-30)

As great a man as John was, we see his true greatness in the humble manner in which he responded to his concerned followers even as he sought to exalt Jesus Christ. We read in John 3:27-30,

²⁷John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' ²⁹He 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. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. ³⁰He must increase, but I must decrease.

The Lord Jesus said that there was never a man born of woman greater than John the Baptist, and perhaps here we see his greatness greatest in that he was a humble man, who desired foremost to exalt Jesus Christ. As **F. F. Bruce** wrote,

John betrays no sense of envy or rivalry. It is not easy to see another's influence growing at the expense of one's own; it is even less easy to rejoice in the sight. But John found his joy completed by the news which his disciples brought.

It takes more grace than I can tell
To play the second fiddle well—

¹⁷ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 171f.

But John manifested a generous share of this rare grace. He came to bear witness, and when he saw so many attracted to Jesus because of his witness, he rested content. ‘He must grow greater; I must grow less’ are John’s last recorded words in this Gospel.¹⁸

Let us consider how John responded to his disciples. First, John states that his ministry and the extent or degree of blessing that his ministry may bring, was due to the sovereign grace of God. **Verse 27** reads, **“John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.’”** God is the One who conducts and furthers His work in His world. He is sovereign in calling certain ones to further His work and He blesses them in their service as He determines what He would have them accomplish.

There were those later in the church at Corinth that exhibited the same kind of petty concern as John’s disciples. It resulted in a party spirit within the church. Paul rebuked them, when he wrote,

⁵Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, **as the Lord gave to each one?** ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, **but God gave the increase.** ⁷So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, **but God who gives the increase.** ⁸Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

⁹For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. ¹⁰According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. (1 Cor. 3:5-10)

Paul made the same argument that John the Baptist did as recorded in John 3:27, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.”

John next told his disciples that they themselves could bear witness that he had never desired or attempted to exalt himself, to make a name for himself. He declared in **verse 28**, **“You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him.’”** John declared that he had been sent by God as a forerunner, as a preparer of the way for the Christ. All along he had declared that he was not the Christ. John never claimed more for himself than what he was. The cause of their distress and complaint was the cause of his rejoicing and the evidence that he was completing the task to which God had called him.

Sometimes “men of God” convey to others that they are bigger and better than normal mortals; they set themselves up on a pedestal. But the Lord is in the business of knocking these kinds of men off their high horse, especially when they set themselves up as something special in His kingdom. He has declared, “I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another” (Isa. 42:8). It is to one’s ultimate advantage to take the “lower seat” than the higher, “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke. 14:7).

John then used a metaphor to describe the joy that he was experiencing even as his own ministry seemed to be winding down. We read in **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. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.”**

John compared his relationship to Jesus as a close friend of a bridegroom. The metaphor includes the bride, in order to show the great position and privilege that the bridegroom had but his friend had not, nevertheless, the friend rejoiced in the Bridegroom’s happiness.

Now it is very unfortunate that there have been those who have promoted a false doctrine in the last 150 years or so based on a twisted interpretation of this passage and its parallels. This is one of the passages that dispensationalists use to claim that the Bible teaches that God has two different programs, for two different peoples, with two distinct purposes, and two different destinies, this being Israel, or the Jewish people, and the New Testament church. **Charles Ryrie**, one of the leading defenders of dispensationalism stated it this way:

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 96.

The nature of the Church is a crucial point of difference between dispensationalism and other doctrinal viewpoints. Indeed, ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the Church, is the touchstone of dispensationalism.¹⁹

And what he means by that, the distinctiveness of the Church is that it is a people that began to form on the Day of Pentecost and will be complete with the rapture of the Church at the beginning of a future seven year tribulation period. The Church is always to be distinguished from Israel as two separate people with two separate destinies. Ryrie argued,

Use of the words *Israel* and the *Church* shows clearly that in the New Testament national Israel continues with her own promises and the Church is never equated with a so-called “new Israel” but is careful and continually distinguished as a separate work of God in this age.²⁰

How do dispensationalists use passages like this one before us in John 3:29f to argue their position? They say that Jesus Christ is the bridegroom and that He has His bride, which is the New Testament Church. John the Baptist was the last Israelite before the onset of the age of the Church. They say that John the Baptist and all Old Testament Israelites are but friends of the Bridegroom. They are not part of the bride, the NT Church, Israel is the friend of the bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

The error that leads to this kind of thinking is a failure to understand and distinguish the metaphors of Scripture. The Bible uses many metaphors to depict our relationship with the Lord in His kingdom. For example, in one place we read that the Father purposed that His Son’s eternal kingdom would also be a great *family*. Jesus Christ would be the head of the household but His family would include multitudes of brothers and sisters who would share in His rule and share in the benefits and privileges of His kingly rule. All of the redeemed, from the earliest believer (Adam?) to the last of God’s elect that comes to faith, are to be regarded as brothers and sisters within the family of God. Here John is simply describing himself as lower in stature than Jesus, as a friend of a bridegroom is to the groom. But as the friend of the bridegroom, there is no jealousy, but gladness over the groom’s blessing.

The error of dispensationalists in this matter can be shown by looking at the same metaphor used in a different context but used completely differently. In Matthew 9 we read of some of John the Baptist’s disciples coming to Jesus and asking why His disciples did not fast as they were accustomed to doing.

¹⁴Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

¹⁵And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” (Matt. 9:14f)

Here the Lord Jesus refers to His own disciples as “wedding guests”; i.e. friends. Does this mean that they are not part of “the Church”, the bride of Christ? Of course not, for the metaphor here is concerned with a “bridegroom” and “the wedding guests.” There is no mention of the bride or her identity in this context. That is a different metaphor found in other contexts, but not in this one. And so, care must be taken to avoid taking the meaning of a term in the metaphor found in one context and imposing it uncritically into another context. And so, depending on the context, the Lord’s people may be depicted as “brothers”, “friends of a bridegroom,” or “brothers” of the king, or any other of a number of images used in Scripture to depict our identity and relationship with the Lord Jesus. The point is this, the Bride of Christ, the Church, is comprised of all those who are redeemed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This includes all Old Testament and New Testament believers.

IV. Conclusion/Interpretation: The Gospel writer’s commentary on the Son (3:31-36)

¹⁹ Charles Ryrie, **Dispensationalism Today** (Moody Press, 1965), p. 132.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 140.

Here the matter is set to rest. In contrast to John the Baptist, who was a great man, Jesus is set forth in His divine nature as having come to earth to reveal God and His will to His people. We read beginning in **verse 31**:

³¹He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³²And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. ³⁴For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. ³⁵The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Jesus Christ has come from above. John the Baptist was a man of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. His witness is first-hand. His testimony is pure and trustworthy. John was but one from the earth, and therefore he is as everyone else before Christ, one who must “decrease.”

But regardless of the importance and validity of Christ’s witness to the truth, people on earth refuse to receive His testimony—“no one receives His testimony.” But there are some who do believe His testimony. They certify that “God is true.” They did believe because their response to the gospel was due to God’s grace.

Of these last verses of John 3, Ryle wrote:

The truth before us is one of the most glorious privileges of the Gospel. There are no works to be done, no conditions to be fulfilled, no price to be paid, no wearing years of probation to be passed, before a sinner can be accepted with God. Let him only believe on Christ, and he is at once forgiven. Salvation is close to the chief of sinners. Let him only repent and believe, and this day it is his own. By Christ all that believe are at once justified from all things.²¹

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love... (Eph. 1:3, 4)

²¹ Ryle, p. 174.