

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Further Testimony From John the Baptist

by Dan Trygg

“John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.’²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, “‘I am not the Christ,’” but, “‘I have been sent ahead of Him.’”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. So this joy of mine has been made full.³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease.³¹ 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.³² What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony.”
John 3:27-32

Jesus and His disciples had left Jerusalem, where they had observed the Passover and met with Nicodemus. They were camping in the Judean countryside, where Jesus was spending time with His followers and was baptizing people who were coming to hear Him teach. His method and message were very similar to John the Baptist’s, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand” (Matt. 5:17). He added the emphasis, “the time *has been fulfilled*” (Mk. 1:14,15), which added an even greater sense of urgency. We also know that, **unlike John, Jesus was performing miraculous signs** (Jn. 10:41). The author refers to them, even though he chooses not to recount them (2:23; 3:2). Not surprisingly, **He began to become very popular**, and people began to go out to hear Him.

Meanwhile, John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing “in Aenon near Salim”. The location is uncertain. What we know is that it was west of the Jordan, about 20 miles south of the Sea of Galilee. It was very close to the northeastern border of Samaria, in the area called the Decapolis (“ten cities” – a league of Greek cities, independent of Galilee, where Herod ruled). One of the main roads from Jerusalem back to Galilee went east of Jerusalem, and then went down into the Jordan valley, and followed that northward. The other main road went north from Jerusalem through the Samaritan highlands to Shechem, where it split into two directions. One branch continued north to Nazareth, and the other descended into the Jordan valley to the northeast, and on to the Sea of Galilee. John the Baptist was strategically located near where this “upper road” descended into the valley and converged with the “lower road” from Jerusalem. The most densely populated area of Galilee was near the Sea of Galilee, so **John placed himself to intersect with the vast majority of northward-bound pilgrims returning from the feast**. Aenon was an Aramaic word for “spring”. There was much water available, so John was located there, where he could immerse those who were dedicating themselves afresh to God. The text says, “they were coming and were being baptized (immersed)”. Both verbs describe continuous, ongoing activity. **John was still very much a significant attraction in Israel.**

“John had not yet been thrown into prison” (vs. 24). **This verse provides a very important historical benchmark for determining the overlap of Jesus’ and John’s ministries.** The other gospel writers give the impression that Jesus’ ministry did not really get off the ground until *after* John was imprisoned (Matt. 4:12; Mk. 1:14; Lk. 3:18-23). John the apostle clarifies this misunderstanding by recording this incident. From this gospel we learn that Jesus was already very busy in His ministry. He had already been gathering some disciples, and had gained the attention of both the general populace and the religious leaders by the signs that He performed, and by His other activities. The Baptist would soon be imprisoned for criticizing Herod’s illegal marriage to his brother’s wife (Matt. 14:3,4; Mk. 6:17,18; Lk. 3:19,20), though at this point *both* he and Jesus are openly ministering in the land. **We can confidently say that everything in John 1-4 took place between Matthew 4:11 and 12.**

From this statement, we get into the meat of this account, recorded by John. Apparently, there had been a discussion between some of John’s disciples and one of the Jews about purification. We have no idea what was said, except that **the report came out that Jesus’ ministry was beginning to eclipse John’s**. It is interesting that when his disciples reported this concern to John, they acknowledge that he had “borne witness” to Jesus, yet **they were jealous that His ministry was becoming larger than John’s**. In their devotion to John, **they missed the important thrust of his testimony**, “He who comes after me has a higher rank than I” and “I am unworthy to untie His sandals” (1:15,27), ...or that he himself (John) had been sent by God “in order that He might be made known to Israel” (1:31).

John’s response to their concerns? **“A person is not able to receive even one thing, if it has not been given to him from heaven.”** John is saying that **Jesus’ popularity is something that God has given to Him**. Conversely, John knows that he can’t righteously *make* something happen that is not within God’s permission. Paul says something similar in I Corinthians 3:5-7. There, people were showing favoritism, loyalty, or even rivalry on behalf of one leader versus another. Paul says, **“Who are we? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. One planted, another watered, but it was God who was causing the growth.”** The point is that God

is the One who decides the extent or popularity of someone's ministry, ...or their success in business, ...or their station in life. **"It is God who decides: He puts one down, and lifts up another"** (Psa. 74:8).

John reminded them of his own testimony. He had said all along that "I am *not* the Christ", ...rather, "I have been sent ahead of Him" (3:28). Then he used an illustration, **"I am like the best man, the friend of the bridegroom."** It was customary for the friend of the bridegroom to bring the bride to the groom, and to stand by to listen to the vows as they were spoken. "It is *my great pleasure* to participate in the wedding, and it is *my joy* to hear my friend exchange vows with his beloved." **"And so this joy of mine has been made full."** -- As it was fitting for the best man to rejoice at the joy of his friend, so it is fitting that John would rejoice at the exaltation and popularity of the One whose way he came to prepare. **"It is necessary for That One to increase, but me to become less important"** (vs. 30).

Whether the next few verses are a continuation of the Baptist's words, or are from the author, there is no way to tell. The argument reflects some of the thoughts from verses 11-13 above, namely, that **Jesus' origin is "from above", and therefore He is uniquely qualified as a witness, to testify to us of "heavenly things"**. They also fit the Baptist's argument, however, in that he had testified as to the greatness of the "One coming after" him. He says, "the One coming from-above (Gk. – anōthen) He is over-and-above all". He is greater than *all* others, so, of course, He will increase, and I will decrease. (Note that this is good contextual support that anōthen earlier in verses 3,7 of this same chapter should have been understood as "from above", not "again".) Beyond that, however, John draws a distinction between someone who originates from the earth ("out-from the earth"), and the One coming out-from heaven. **Someone whose origin is out-from the earth is out-from the earth and speaks out-from the earth.** In other words, his entire nature, experience and perception would be from a natural, earthly perspective. **But, someone "coming out-from heaven" can testify of what He has seen and heard there.** His background and experiences uniquely qualify Him to speak of "heavenly realities". **By comparison, this also disqualifies everyone else who would claim to understand heavenly realities, because they do not have first-hand experience. They would have to rely on mere speculation, or some other secondary source. Jesus is a far superior witness of heavenly truth, because He has been there!** "...but no one receives His testimony..." **Even the best source of information is of little benefit to those who do not accept it.**

Most people were *not* responding to what Jesus had to say. **However, the one receiving His testimony affirms that God is true.** If anyone will recognize the truthfulness of what Jesus has to say, he is identifying with and declaring that Jesus *is* teaching the words that *come from God*. Those who are accepting and taking what was Jesus' message have at some point "stamped" with their personal approval or endorsement that God is for real, and trustworthy. "For whom God sent, that person speaks the personal-directives of God." The Greek for "word" here is a form of rhēma, referring more to spoken words than just the ideas, i.e., the utterances of God, not just the content. The significance of it here would be the idea of more personal communication from God to Jesus, which then qualifies Him to more accurately convey God's heart to us. **When a person comes in his own strength or ability, his message may be generally accurate. But, when the living God sends someone as His mouthpiece, He will put His specific message into the mouth of His spokesperson, and he or she will be able to deliver a personal message that is timely and powerful.** "...for He gives the Spirit without measure..." Technically, "Spirit" could be either the subject or the direct object. He is either the Giver, or the thing-given. The Spirit could give without measure to Jesus (thus qualifying Him as a source of information from God); or that God gives the Spirit without measure to Jesus (again, to show His qualifications); or God gives the Spirit without measure (a general statement regarding God's desire to freely and abundantly offer His Spirit to all), or it could mean that Jesus gives the Spirit without measure (i.e., freely to men). **The point is that when God sends someone, He will give Him both the message and the spiritual power to fulfill His purpose.**

"The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand" (vs. 35). The kind of love mentioned here is *agapaō*, the benevolent set of the will toward honoring, valuing and bringing about good for the one being loved. One reason for this is given in Philippians 2:5-11. **It is the Father's purpose to magnify Jesus**, and to sum up all things into Him (Eph. 1:10). Part of this is to give to Him all that the Father has (John restates this claim in 13:3, and Jesus says it of Himself in 5:19-30 and Matthew 11:27; 28:18.). This is definitely a statement of Christ's deity. "The one believing in the Son has age-type life; but the one stubbornly-resisting the Son will not see life, rather the wrath of God remains upon him" (vs. 36). **God is looking for those who will trust in His Son. Trusting implies aligning your life with His in obedience, just as to stubbornly-resist Him is to walk in disobedience.** It is important to see that **transforming age-type life can be ours now, or we remain under wrath.** It is like those bit by the serpents in the wilderness, earlier in the chapter. They would die because of the serpent's venom, not because they did not look at the bronze serpent on the pole. But, that was the provision of God on their behalf. In the same way, **we are all under wrath for our sin. Our own sin is what condemns us. Jesus is our hope, but we must choose to lay hold of Him by committing ourselves to Him by faith.** Inaction means death. We must choose Him.