

OpenTheo

John Decreases, Jesus Increases (Part 1)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the biblical account of John the Baptist's decreasing popularity and Jesus' increasing prominence. He explains that the success of a ministry should not be measured in terms of the number of followers, but rather in their depth and integrity. John Baptist resigns himself to the fact that he is not the bridegroom, but rather the friend of the bridegroom, and rejoices in Jesus' growing popularity.

Transcript

Let's turn to John chapter 3. Last time we treated the first part of this chapter, which is about the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus by night. We finished with that. And the scene changes in verse 22.

We are not told in the earlier verses exactly how the conversation with Nicodemus ended. We're not specifically told whether Nicodemus had his questions answered to his satisfaction. Last we heard from him, he was still asking questions, and then Jesus, of course, had the last word, and we don't know whether Nicodemus found Jesus' explanations enlightening or difficult still.

As I pointed out yesterday, however, there are a couple other references to Nicodemus later in John, in chapter 7, and again in chapter 19. And in both places he appears to be taking his stand on the side of Jesus, which means that whether he fully understood this mysterious stuff about being born again, of which Jesus spoke to him in chapter 3, on that occasion he at least was favorably impressed with Jesus after his interview, and tended to take a stand for him later. The fact that he is known by name and by John, who is writing this, of course, decades later, suggests the possibility that Nicodemus may have become a part of the early church.

The gospels sometimes will mention individuals that have bit hearts in the story of Jesus by name, and other times will not. Jesus raised three people from the dead in his lifetime that we know of. One was Lazarus, who the Bible names for us.

Another was the son of a widow from Nain, who is not named. Neither she nor the son are named. And another was the daughter of a man named Jairus, who is remembered

by name.

My assumption is that Jairus probably became a member of the church, which is why the gospel writers, in telling the story, knew his name to give it. Jesus probably had contacts with many people who needed miracles done, and so forth, that he never learned their name. As far as we know, he didn't take time to ascertain personal information about them before he helped them.

And the disciples would not generally know someone's name, probably, just from a brief encounter with Jesus, unless there was some later acquaintance with them, which most naturally would have occurred if those people were in the church. Nicodemus, I think, probably, we can understand, was one who would become a member of the church later on, and therefore, these stories about him are told by John with some knowledge. I mean, the story about Nicodemus taking the body of Jesus and burying it, and the story about Nicodemus meeting with Jesus here, could be known by the apostles without Nicodemus being their informant.

However, in chapter 7, where there is a conversation among the chief priests, and they say, have any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed in him, and Nicodemus speaks up, that story would not be known to John by first hand. And the most likely informant and source for that story would be Nicodemus himself. It's probable that Nicodemus did become a believer and a member of the church.

Certainly, the few indications we have after this point that direction. Now, verse 22, after these things, Jesus and his disciples came into the land of Judea, and there he remained with them and baptized. Now, into the land of Judea doesn't mean that he had been not in Judea before.

He was actually in Jerusalem, which was the capital of Judea, there at the time when he conversed with Nicodemus. But to say he came into the land of Judea means he left the city. He went out into the territories round about in the countryside, rather than remaining in the city, the capital city where the previous story had taken place.

And he found there a place to baptize. It says, now John also was baptizing in Anon near Salim, because there was much water there, and they came and were baptized. Now, it says in verse 22 that Jesus remained in Judea and baptized.

However, it's clarified for us a little later, Jesus himself did not personally baptize people, it would appear. In chapter 4, verse 2, we're told that. In chapter 4, verse 1, it says, Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, though Jesus himself did not baptize but his disciples.

Now, that but his disciples is not a complete clause. It's not clear whether it means that he didn't personally baptize anyone except his disciples. That's possibly how it's to be

understood.

He did baptize his disciples, but he didn't baptize anyone else. However, the point is made in verse 1 that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John. Everyone that Jesus baptized was a disciple.

And then it says, but he didn't baptize anyone but his disciples. It may mean to say that though Jesus baptized a number of people who were his disciples, he didn't baptize anyone else. Like John, John baptized anyone who came repenting, whether they became one of his disciples or not.

It may be saying that Jesus restricted his baptizing activity to those who were his disciples. However, I think it's more normally been understood that John 4.2 means that Jesus didn't baptize anyone at all. His disciples did the baptizing on his behalf.

That he didn't go down in the water and do it. His disciples did it, but because they did it on his behalf, they did it in his name or whatever, it can be said he did it. Which is of course the case with many things in the scripture.

Something is not done personally by an individual, but is done by someone on their behalf and therefore is spoken of as if they did it. As for instance, when Paul says that the Jews crucified Jesus. Everybody knows it was the Romans who crucified Jesus, not the Jews.

The Jews didn't nail any nails in him. That's what crucifying is. But it's clearly done at the instigation and at the behest of the Jews and on their behalf, even though the Romans did the dirty work.

So also the disciples, it may be saying in John 4.2 that the disciples are the ones who actually baptized, but it could be spoken of as if Jesus had baptized these people because it was done on his behalf by his representatives. In any case, it's not all that clear whether it's telling us that Jesus did baptize his disciples and no one else, or whether he didn't baptize anyone, but his disciples did the baptizing on his behalf. Anyway, that point of clarification occurs in chapter 4, but we're just told in chapter 22 that Jesus remained in Judea for a while for the purpose of baptizing.

And it mentions that John also was still baptizing at that time. And in verse 24 it says, for John had not yet been thrown into prison, which you might have assumed by the fact that he was still baptizing. Now, these verses are worth pausing a moment to reflect on.

It says that John was baptizing in Anon near Silim because there was much water there. It indicates that he selected the spot because of the quantity of water. We are never told directly in the scripture what mode of baptism was followed by John and by Jesus and the disciples.

Although there are many today who believe that they sprinkled or poured. Of course, others believe that they immersed. This is one of the verses that seems to weigh in favor of immersion.

Because if pouring or sprinkling was the method of baptism, it would not require a great deal of water even to baptize a large number of people. A few drops on each would be sufficient. All you need is a bucket full, you could do a whole town.

So, the fact that he selected that place because of the abundance of water there suggests that the form of baptism he was practicing required some quantity of water. It had to be at least enough probably to immerse a person in. Now, in saying in verse 24, for John had not yet been thrown into prison, this may seem like an insignificant little comment and aside, but it is very helpful in ascertaining the order of events in the Gospels.

The reason I say so is because if you turn over to Mark, for example, and Matthew and Luke follow Mark in this respect or are very much like Mark in this point. Mark chapter 1, you may notice that in verses 9 through 11, we have the baptism of Jesus when he got baptized. We've already covered that a long time ago.

Then, verses 12 and 13 tell about him being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. We've covered that already before too. Then, it says in verse 14, right after it tells about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, it says, Now, after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God.

Now, notice, it tells of Jesus being baptized and of his being tempted for 40 days in the wilderness. Then, immediately, it says, after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee. So, his Galilean ministry began at that point.

Matthew also says, basically gives the same information, and so does Luke. Essentially, Jesus' recorded ministry in the Synoptics begins after John is put into prison. It says that in Matthew 4, excuse me, Matthew 4, verse 12, which again is right after the description of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, which happened very early.

It says in Matthew 4, verse 12, Now, when Jesus heard that John had been put into prison, he departed to Galilee. Now, that means that the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, do not tell us anything about Jesus' ministry before the imprisonment of John. They tell of Jesus being baptized and tempted, but they tell of nothing he said, did, any ministry he did before John was in prison.

But, here in John 4, 24, we read, John had not yet been thrown in prison. So, this gives us a chronological assistance to realize that John is here telling us about things that Jesus said and did before the time period that the other gospels begin to record. The other gospels skip immediately from the temptation of Jesus to his Galilean ministry, which

occurred when John was put in prison.

But, these chapters in John, chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, the beginning of chapter 4, these all occurred before John was put in prison, it would seem. And, therefore, they fill a gap that the Synoptics just kind of leave open. That may not be all important to you, but if you ever try to harmonize the events in the gospels, say, well, when did this happen in relation to that? This little comment in John 3, in verse 24, is very helpful in pointing out that we're talking about a time prior to the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry.

Now, Jesus' Galilean ministry is alluded to, in my opinion, in the opening verses of John 4. So, John must have been put into prison by this time, because we just read in Matthew, when Jesus heard that John was put into prison, he went to Galilee. Well, look at the opening verses of John 4. Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, though Jesus himself did not baptize but his disciples, he left Judea and departed again to Galilee. And, by all accounts, this is the beginning of his Galilean ministry.

The only difference here, in the way John tells it, from the way that Matthew did, is that John says that Jesus did this when he heard that the Pharisees knew that he was baptizing more than John had. Matthew says when he knew that John was put in prison. There's no reason to see that as contradictory.

Those things may have been simultaneous. He received news that John had been put in prison, and he also was aware that the Pharisees were taking note of his activities. They had formerly been negative toward John.

John was out of the way, but they saw that Jesus was doing more damage than John was, as it were, from their point of view. And these factors inclined him to leave Judea and to go on up into Galilee and begin his Galilean ministry. In any case, we can see that at about chapter 4, we're beginning to overlap the time period that the Synoptic Gospels cover, but in chapter 3, we're still talking about things before that.

Now, the focus in these last verses of chapter 3 are going to be on John the Baptist. We've had Jesus in the limelight in the beginning part, but now we're going to see John the Baptist basically dismissed from the story. This is the last vision of John the Baptist we have in the Gospel of John.

In the Synoptics, there is a little later information. For example, the Synoptics after this point tell of a time when John, while in prison, sent messengers to Jesus to inquire whether he was the one that was to come or not. In Matthew chapter 9, where is it there? No, it's not there.

It's elsewhere. It's before that. I don't recall exactly where it is in Matthew, but it tells that John sent messengers to Jesus, and so that obviously is later than this point.

Also, the Synoptics tell us of John's death in prison. But John is going to say nothing more about John after this chapter, about John the Baptist. So here's our parting vision of John the Baptist from the pen of John the Apostle.

It says in verse 25, There arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And 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. Now, this dispute that arose led to the disciples of John coming to John with this information.

It's not exactly clear on the surface why this dispute mentioned in verse 25 would have anything to do with the comment they made to John the Baptist in verse 26. But we can sort of read between the lines and assume this. In all likelihood, the disciples of John did not fully understand the meaning of baptism anyway.

They were Jews, and Jews were very familiar with the concept of purification, that is washing, ceremonial washing. And no doubt in the minds of John's disciples, John's baptism was somehow connected in concept with these washing away uncleanness. It's possible that they had a more enlightened view than that, but perhaps those who approached them and who started this conflict with them might have rendered it that way.

They might have been talking about, well, why does John do it this way when the Pharisees wash this other way? Why is John doing this once and for all immersion thing where the Pharisees just wash their hands? I don't know that this is the precise way that the conversation got started, but it's clear that because John was famous for baptizing, which was of course in a sense a washing in water, that the Jews who raised an issue with John's disciples about purification, purification has to do with washings also. No doubt there was some way this conversation was trying to find the connection, the conceptual connection between what John was doing and what the Pharisees already did in terms of washings. Now, in that context, it would appear that John's disciples got wind of the fact, probably from those they were arguing with, that Jesus was actually more successful now than John was, that they're a lot more popular.

More people are coming to Jesus to be baptized than were coming to John. Now, this appears to be news to John's disciples. They've been hanging around John so they don't know what's going on on the other side of the river or down the stream or whatever, what Jesus is doing.

So, we have to assume that those people that were in an argument with John's disciples, they took the opportunity to inform John's disciples that Jesus was now more popular than John. They can hardly have had any motive in saying this rather than to just kind of, as a jab to them. You know, there was some kind of a conflict.

They would say, well, you're following this guy John the Baptist, he's a has-been, don't you even know this guy Jesus, he's a lot more popular now. People all used to come out to John, now they're all going to Jesus. And trying to make these guys feel like they're backing the losing horse.

Now, they were, in fact, backing the losing horse. It's amazing that they were even still disciples of John the Baptist. I find it astonishing that after the events of chapter 1, where John said, look, there's the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, and a few of the disciples, probably John and Andrew, they ceased to be John's disciples and they go follow Jesus.

Well, you'd think all of John's disciples would do the same, but many of them did not. Many of them stayed with John, and even after his death were still regarded as his disciples. Because it says after Herod killed him that John's disciples came and buried his body.

And when John was in prison, John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus some things. It's a very curious thing. After John gives testimony to Jesus and baptizes him, we don't read much more about John.

We don't know very much about the relationship of him and his disciples. Whether these people were just, whether they were learning from him, still. Whether they were there because he was in prison, just to kind of make sure his needs were met, to bring him food and stuff like that.

We don't know what this relationship was or why they remained disciples of John when he had already pointed to Jesus, and some of the wiser disciples had gone off and transferred and become disciples of Jesus instead. In any case, John apparently didn't forbid them to be his disciples. He didn't say, listen, get away from me, go follow Jesus.

There must have been something valid in the ongoing relationship between John and his disciples. But they were coming to have to face the facts. John was a has-been.

John was fading from public popularity and Jesus was on the rise at this particular time. And they were disturbed about that. It's sort of like if you came to a town and there was a big happening church, revival was going on there, all the other churches were kind of dreary, but there was one church that just had a name.

This is where God is really moving and all the beautiful people, all the hip people were going to this church. This is where anybody who is anybody is going to this church now. This pastor has got the best preachers and the worship is out of this world, it's great.

And everyone goes to this church and you kind of look down your nose condescendingly on people who go to other sleepy little churches and so forth. But you're really at the place where it's happening. You're under the spout where the glory comes out.

And then all of a sudden a new church starts in town. And it starts growing rapidly. And not only does it start growing rapidly, it grows at the expense of your church.

The people in your church start seeing there's something going on over there. They say, you know, I think next time I may just visit over there and see what that preacher is like. And they never come back.

And the people who are loyal to the original church begin to say, hey, our ranks are thin in here. Do you know someone told me that that church across town, that new church, that they're bigger than we are now? Now, that kind of information does have a tendency to arouse jealousy in carnal minds. And believe me, there are carnal minds in leadership in churches.

Even the Calvary Chapel I used to be a part of in Santa Cruz where I was an elder. We had a deacon who got real upset because in Santa Cruz there's quite a few charismatic congregations full of young people. And every time I knew where to start, you know, people with itching ears and even people who didn't have itching ears, but people who just were looking for something better, they'd check out the new church in town.

And at one point a church, Tom will know the church, Coastlands had started in Santa Cruz. And we had had several hundred people in our Calvary Chapel and they began to start visiting this new church in town. And the preacher at that church was better than, or more exciting than the preacher at our church.

And of course I wasn't the preacher at our church, I was just an elder. But a lot of people began to feel that this new church really had the goods, you know. And so a number of people began to go there.

And people who had formerly gone to our congregation, but were now going to this new church, were still of course in fellowship with people from our church because they were friends. And what one of our deacons reported to us as elders, he said, you know what's happening? Is these people who have left and gone to Coastlands, you know, they're still getting together with our people and having dinner with them and stuff as they always did. And then they're inviting our people to go over and visit that congregation.

And this deacon actually, on his own, you know, without any authorization from us, began telling his people, don't have dinner with these people who have left the church. Don't eat with them. Don't do things with them and stuff.

And he's practically excommunicating these people who have changed churches. And we elders had to rebuke this deacon for that attitude. I mean, he was jealous over our church.

But, I mean, this kind of carnality exists even among church leaders, you know. I heard a story, probably not a true story, but a Presbyterian pastor was informed by his elders

that they were losing members. Their attendance was down and giving was down and so forth.

And their church had fallen on hard times. And the pastor said, he looked across the street and said, well, at least the Methodist church isn't doing any better. He comforted himself with the fact that other churches were doing as badly as he was.

Now, not all pastors have a competitive attitude. In fact, I think this is less and less the case these days. I think there's a very positive thing that I've seen in the last probably 15 years where pastors who used to be threatened by other pastors in town are either acting like they're not or are genuinely not threatened by other pastors anymore.

There's a growing number of pastors, it seems, who have gotten the picture. And, hey, the body of Christ, all these churches are in the body of Christ. If someone leaves my church and goes to another church, they haven't been lost to the Lord.

They're just grazing in another pasture. They're not my sheep, they're God's, you know. So, I mean, if the grass is better over there, then more power to them.

That's where they should be. And I've met a lot of pastors, and I praise God for this, that seem to feel this way now and have this attitude. And even the ones who don't have that attitude usually are having to act like they do because it's getting to be the right, you know, recognizes the right way to see things.

You're not jealous of other churches that are growing. I suspect that some pastors still, although they may not say so, still get a little bit of an ache when they see people leaving their congregation and preferring another church to their own. I mean, you do take it kind of personally.

But until recently, that was kind of a given. I mean, we live in a day of great ecumenism. It's because the charismatic movement has penetrated so many different denominations and stuff, and people have had to get used to the idea of unity between people who they never felt associated with in other denominations before.

This is a phenomenon that's happened within my lifetime, and I can still remember a time when, you know, if a person was a Baptist, left the church to go to join the assemblies of God or to join the Methodist Church or the Salvation Army, there would have been very, very strong feelings on those in the Baptist Church that they left, that this person was a traitor. This person was not loyal. This person was a defector.

Fortunately, that attitude is not as rampant as it was for many, many, probably centuries since the Protestant Reformation, no doubt. Although I still run into people who feel that way. I've still been in congregations that once we decide we're going to go somewhere else, we are treated as if we've somehow violated some contract.

You know, we've shown ourselves to be traitors or disloyal. That's a shame. But it's understandable, because people, many people, certainly carnal people, tend to be insecure and try to find their security in being part of a group.

I mean, even secure people do that. I mean, we find our identity in the body of Christ. We're part of Christ, and all those who are in Christ are part of the group we're part of.

If the body of Christ began to dwindle radically, I mean, if defectors were... I mean, if everywhere we look, people who were true Christians are going back into the world or converting to Rajneesh, or something like that, you know, we might start to get a little insecure. I can remember, believe it or not, when I was a teenager, and this was obviously very carnal on my part at this time, and I probably knew it then, and I've always known it since then, but I grew my hair out when I was first in the ministry. But a lot of people had long hair then.

I mean, it was the cultural thing to do. I was doing what my generation was doing. But I liked my hair long.

I don't like it short. And eventually, long hair ceased to be the style. And more and more of the people who used to wear their hair long were cutting it.

And this never induced me to want to cut my hair. But it made me feel really insecure. I remember the feelings of insecurity, saying, Hey, I used to be part of a big movement, you know.

The Jesus Freaks. Suddenly, no one's freaky anymore, you know. I'm the only one left, you know.

And I distinctly remember the feelings of insecurity that I felt about that. Like, hey, when I got into this movement, it was the happening thing. I mean, anyone who was anyone was going to Calvary Chapel, and everyone was a long-haired, hippie, Christian, street evangelist kind of person.

It was the thing to be and the thing to do. I still remain that, even when it was no longer the thing to do, because I did it out of conviction, and I liked it, and I thought it was right. But I remember feeling, you know, like, gosh, you know, I'm really part of a dwindling minority, and it felt, you know, less secure.

I'm sure the Roman Catholics felt that way, whereas the Protestant Reformation got going, and people started going over into, you know, leaving the Catholic Church to go into other movements. If you find your security, and many people, of course, naturally do, in the association that you identify with, whether it's your, you know, your denomination, or your church, or whether it's the fact that you're part of the surfing culture, or you're a biker, or whatever, you know. When you begin to see that culture or that group begin to diminish, there's a tendency, a natural tendency, to feel a little less

secure, because you always feel more secure when you're on a big team, when you're part of a big group, and when that group gets smaller, you begin to feel like you have fewer comrades, you're part of a smaller army, and, you know, it's just a natural thing, I think, for people to do.

It's not right, and spiritual people have to overcome it, but I think that John's disciples were feeling that very thing. They had ridden the crest of this wave of a great revival that was taking place. All Judea had been going out to be baptized by John at one time, confessing their sins.

John's name was a household word. There wasn't a person in all of Israel that didn't know the name John the Baptist, and way out of the country, too. It all ran into people in Ephesus, in Turkey, that were followers of John.

They knew about John, but they'd never heard about Jesus. I mean, John was a big-name celebrity, and the day when they didn't have newspapers and radio and stuff, for a guy to be that well-known all over the place was a very unusual thing, and the disciples of John had gotten in while the getting was good, and had come in on the ground floor, and they'd gotten close to John, and they were part of his team, and he was the big name in that generation, and so forth. But all of a sudden, his popularity was diminishing, and someone else was getting all the... They're all going to another church now.

Another pastor in town was having all the haps in his movement, and the miracles were happening there. See, John never even did miracles, and people were flocking to hear Jesus, because he had miracles. And John the Baptist, had he been a less spiritual man than he was, could easily have gotten jealous.

I've known pastors who get jealous in comparable situations. His own disciples, I think, were jealous. I think they were threatened by this situation.

And when they heard it in this conflict they had with these Jews about purification, and somehow someone brought up, well, Jesus is more popular now. You remember all those people who used to come to John, they're going to Jesus now. I think that really bothered the disciples of John.

And they came to John to get his reaction. And they said, Master, do you know that the guy you baptized over there, more people are going to him than to you. And John answered in verse 27 and said, A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.

You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. 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. He must increase, he must increase. Now it's

possible that John the Baptist continued speaking to the end of the chapter.

My impression is that we have in verse 30 the climax and the final quote from John the Baptist, and that we have what looks to me like John's commentary in the remaining verses, which we'll take of course separately, quotation marks notwithstanding. Those quotation marks are the translator's opinion, and could be correct, but also could be incorrect. Now John's reaction was very different than that of his disciples.

In fact he was a little disappointed that they reacted the way they did. Didn't I tell you that I'm not the Christ? You're acting like I'm supposed to be God's last word to man. Like my movement's supposed to be the final thing.

As if I were the Christ. I told you that's not the case. Now John's first statement in response to him in verse 27 was, a man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.

That's a very strong statement of faith in the sovereignty of God, because what he's talking about there is of course Jesus' following. Jesus has received this following not through his own trickery or through his own advertising or merchandising his movement, but because God has given it to him. If he has more followers than I do, that must be what God wants.

John the Baptist was resigned. Now let me tell you something. John enjoyed having all the people come to him.

Who wouldn't? I mean, anyone in the ministry would appreciate everyone coming to hear you preach. Everyone coming forward at your altar calls and being baptized by you. Who wouldn't love that? And yet John realized that the time had come for him to begin to fade out of the picture.

His main purpose was to introduce the Christ, and once the Christ had appeared, John would have little left to do. And so, no doubt, in his own sentiments, there could have been a little bit of, at some level, a little bit of sadness to see the glory days pass. I mean, not sadness in the ultimate sense, because he was really rejoicing that what he had come to announce had come to be.

But there must have been times, especially later when he was in prison, thinking back on the good old days, back when everyone respected me, everyone listened to me preach. I mean, boy, everyone was coming forward at my altar calls. No doubt he missed that.

Anyone would. But despite the fact that I assume he probably did miss it, he saw the will of God to be all that's important in ministry. A man's success is given to him by God.

No one can receive anything except it comes down from heaven to him. Now, this is so important, because success in the ministry is generally gauged, wrongly, but generally,

in terms of numbers, how large a church is, how many people are coming there. If a church grows so large that they build bigger buildings and bigger Sunday school wings and so forth, this is considered to be the mark of a successful church.

A pastor of a church like that can count on it. He's going to be invited to speak at church growth seminars. All these little wannabe pastors are going to want to hear how he did it, because he has the trappings of success.

He has the marks of a successful pastor. Well, the fact of the matter is, the most important thing for a pastor to concentrate on is not how to make his church bigger, is not how to increase the size of the circle of his influence. As desirable as that may be, and even seem, it's quite obvious that a pastor will seemingly do more good if he has a congregation of a thousand to preach good things to, than if he has only 10 or 15 to preach good things to.

On the other hand, God is in control over those kinds of things. John the Baptist said, what he's referring to here is the size of Jesus' congregation, the number who are coming to Jesus instead of John. He said, well, that's from God.

And John was quite willing to let God decide the breadth of his influence and the breadth of his popularity. I don't recall whether I've ever told you this or not, but I may have, but a friend of mine who once had a very powerful ministry, it had a powerful effect on me. He was not a well-known guy, but he was known in a certain small circle.

He taught in home Bible studies and stuff, and he was a very godly man. And I was very impressed with him, to tell you the truth. Whenever he spoke, it just seemed like there was a lot of life and a lot of anointing in his words.

He was humble, close to the Lord. And I got a great deal out of his ministry, and a number of people did. Then he had a crisis in his family.

His wife actually committed adultery. She became pregnant by another guy, and she didn't tell him that it wasn't his baby, she told him it was someone else's baby. And it was a real demoralizing kind of a crisis in his life.

He tried to salvage his marriage, and his wife ended up running off with the guy whose baby it was and married him and stuff. This fellow, he just kind of faded out of view for a while. I didn't hear any more about him.

I spent some time with him when he was going through that. He kind of disappeared. Eventually, he became a missionary to the Navajos in Nevada.

I think he's in Nevada now. He's a brilliant guy. He's translating Bibles and books and stuff into Navajo language.

But for some years, he didn't appear to be doing much of anything. After his marriage broke up, he just kind of gave up his teaching commitments and stuff and went to work at a furniture store or something like that. I moved to Santa Cruz, so I didn't hear from him much.

I had lunch with him. His name happened to be Steve. Like mine, his name was Steve Watkins.

I said, Steve, what's become of your ministry? I can remember a real anointing on your ministry and stuff. Are you doing any ministry now? Do you have much opportunity to teach? He's a good teacher. I'd like to have him come teach here.

I don't know exactly how to get in touch with him right now. He said, the Lord has just impressed one thing on me really powerfully through all this. He said, God wants me to concentrate on the depth of my ministry and leave it up to him to decide the breadth of my ministry.

And what he was saying is that there weren't very many people coming to him to hear him teach. There were a few people, no doubt, that he talked to one-on-one. His ministry was not very broad, but he had learned that God was trying to give him depth in his life.

Suffering has a way of doing that for people. It gives you more depth, makes you more sober, makes you more contemplative. It causes you to draw nearer to God in a lot of ways.

And he sensed, and he told me this, and it stuck really powerfully in my mind when he said that his concern was not the breadth of his ministry in the will of God. And he was quite content to leave it with God to decide how broadly his influence was advertised, how many people came to hear him. He certainly had taken a loss in that department at that time.

It is since that time that he went to be a missionary among the Navajos, and I think he's doing fairly well. I think he's received some recognition in that work. But whether he has or not, my concern is not to decide how many people are interested in hearing what I have to say.

My concern is making sure that what I have to say has integrity and that it's what I know from God or the best I can do in representing what I think God would have me say and do and live in my life the way I think God wants me to. It's integrity, it's faithfulness, it's those things that matter more than what the world calls success in ministry. He's not at the level he had before.

There was a sense in which his ministry appeared to be the sun was going down on John the Baptist's ministry. People weren't coming to him anymore. But he was basically, like my friend Steve Watkins, he said, you know, well, that's from God.

Let God decide how many people come to hear me and how many hear Jesus. The man doesn't receive anything except from heaven. I'll leave the issue of the breadth of ministry in God's hands.

And if that's the way God chooses, then that makes sense to me. I can rejoice in that. And that's what he goes on to say.

He says in verse 28, you yourselves bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ, but I've been sent before him. So why should you expect my ministry to be the last thing God's going to do and the largest and so forth? I'm not the Christ. Obviously the Christ would have a bigger influence than I did and should.

And he says in verse 29, the joy of mine is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, which would be in their culture the man who's pretty much the matchmaker and the one who introduced the bride and the groom, or at least was the one who made the arrangements for them to come together and be married. 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. Essentially what he's saying there in verse 29 is, we've got a situation. We've got a bridegroom who is Jesus.

We've got a bride. That's the people. The bride of Christ, the church, God's faithful remnant are the bride.

And we've got a guy who's the bridegroom's friend. And that's John the Baptist. Now, John the Baptist is not jealous that the bride is going to the bridegroom.

That's exactly what the bridegroom's friend is there for. To introduce, to arrange for the bride and the bridegroom is what the bridegroom's friend's role is. Now, John is not saying it in so many words, but what is obviously underlying his comment is that he, John, is not the bridegroom, but he's the bridegroom's friend.

The people who are now going in great numbers to Jesus, they would be the bride. And Jesus is the groom to whom the bride ought to come. And when the bridegroom's friend learns that his efforts have been successful, namely that the bride isn't coming and that his mission is complete, he rejoices that he's been successful in his mission.

And that's essentially what he's saying. Now, I would turn your attention for a moment over to Matthew chapter 9, because this happens, of course, after John is put in prison. In Matthew chapter 9, verse 14 and following, the disciples of John came to Jesus with a question.

Matthew 9, 14 says, the disciples of John came to him saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast often? But your disciples, that is the disciples of Jesus, don't fast. And Jesus said to them, Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom

is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. Now, Jesus was saying, essentially, these disciples of mine, when they're with me, it's like being, it's a festal occasion.

It's not a time for fasting and mourning. You don't do that at a wedding feast. When the bridegroom goes away and the feast is over and everyone goes back to their own tasks, then they'll have their occasions for sorrow and forgetting the mirth and so forth.

But when the bridegroom is there and the festival is still on, you don't use that as an occasion to mourn and fast. That is a time of celebration. Therefore, he says, I was sent by the bridegroom.

These were the disciples of John. John had already spoken to his disciples using that very image about Christ, that Jesus is the bridegroom. And John the Baptist was not a bridegroom.

John the Baptist didn't have a celebrating kind of a spirit about him. A lot of people I've known who have adopted a somewhat ascetic way of life, emphasizing a lot of things like fasting and poverty vows and those kinds of things, they often feel that they're doing this in faithfulness to the imitation of Christ. Many people I know feel that when they picture Christ, they picture Christ as a very ascetic, hard on himself kind of a guy.

A guy who wouldn't joke around, would never crack a smile, a man who's always sober and so forth. Well, I don't think the Bible depicts Jesus that way. In fact, the Bible does depict John the Baptist that way.

But Jesus goes out of the way to point out a difference from himself and John the Baptist in this very respect. In Matthew chapter 11, Matthew 11 verse 16 and following, Jesus said, But to what shall I liken this generation? It's like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to their companions saying, We played the flute for you and you didn't dance. And we mourned to you and you didn't lament.

For John came neither eating nor drinking. He was an ascetic. And they say he has a demon.

The Son of Man came eating and drinking. And they say, look, a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Now, Jesus is trying to show the Jews that they're really not easily reached.

God has taken two opposite approaches and they're not reached by either of them. First, God sent John the Baptist. What are you looking for? What do you expect a holy man to be? An ascetic? Someone who doesn't drink wine? Someone who doesn't eat meat? Somebody who lives out in the wilderness and wears rough clothes? Well, John the Baptist came doing that.

But you didn't respond to him. So God sends Jesus. And he's just the other way.

He's partying. He's in feasts all the time. He's drinking wine.

He's eating meat. He's doing all the things John the Baptist didn't allow himself to do in his normal lifestyle. Jesus is earning for himself a reputation of a party animal, a friend of sinners, a wine-bibber, and so forth.

Now, of course, that reputation was exaggerated. Obviously, the words that he says that they called him, a friend of sinners, a wine-bibber, and a glutton, those are an exaggeration. He was not a drunkard.

He was not a glutton. But his enemies were able to see in his lifestyle grounds to exaggerate and depict him in that way. Now, Jesus says that's like children who are fond when you play a dirge, they won't mourn, you play a happy tune, and they won't dance.

Children complaining to the commander, we played the flute, and you didn't dance, excuse me, and we played the dirge, the funeral dirge, and you didn't mourn. You know, what do you want to play? You want to play a happy game or you want to play a sad game? Neither? You want to play a game and asceticism and harsh treatment of the body and so forth. That didn't attract you.

You didn't want to play that game.