

## John 3:31–36

### Introduction

We left off last week with the last recorded words of John the Baptist in John’s Gospel. It was not given to John to be the bridegroom, and neither was it given to John to be a part of the New Covenant bride – not in this life. Instead, John was given the task of making ready a bride prepared for the coming of the bridegroom. And now, as the last representative of that old order of things that was fading away, so John, too, was fading away. In response to the disappointment and even the resentment of his disciples at this apparent injustice, John said this:

- John 3:27–30 — “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Now that John the Baptist has signed off, as it were, with those words, John the Apostle follows them up with his own commentary in verses 31–36.

**I. John 3:31b** — He who comes from above is above all. **He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way.**

Why is it that as John decreases, it should be so right and appropriate that Jesus increases? Because even John the Baptist is still of the earth, and belongs to the earth and therefore can only speak in an earthly way. The Greek is even more expressive: “He who is **of** the earth [*ek tes ges*], **of** the earth [*ek tes ges*] **he is** [*estin*], and **of** the earth [*ek tes ges*] **he speaks**.” We didn’t come down from heaven, did we? We were all brought into existence here on this earth, and so we are all “of the earth” in the sense that it’s from the earth that we’ve all originated. Let’s go back to Genesis chapter two and the creation of man:

- Genesis 2:7 — The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

Whatever the mysteries in these words one thing is clear: Man is from the earth. And this, in turn, means that we are, all of us, wholly conditioned—conditioned in every way—by our earthly existence. If we are of the earth, in terms of *origin*, then we are of the earth in terms of our whole existence. “The one who is of the earth,” says John, “of the earth *he is*.” The Apostle John is speaking here not of the world, but of the earth. The point isn’t anything fleshly, or sinful, or evil, but rather that which is finite and creaturely and therefore by an inescapable necessity bounded in every way by this finite, and creaturely, and earthly existence. It’s from this general principle that John moves now to a specific application: “He who is of the earth, of the earth *he is*, and of the earth *he speaks*.” The point is not that he speaks always of earthly things, but that when he speaks (even when he speaks of heavenly things), he can only speak *as* one who is from the earth and who is, therefore, wholly conditioned by his earthly existence.

This may all seem “elementary” and “self-evident” to us, but throughout history there have been many who thought they could in some sense transcend or escape the restrictions and the limitations of being creatures of this earth. They’ve thought that because we’ve been made in the image of God and because we’ve been made sons and daughters of God through our union with Christ, therefore at least some of the limitations of our “earthly existence” may be transcended. We may never have thought like that, but on the other hand, we may never have fully come to terms with just how “of the earth” we are, and the far-reaching limitations that this reality brings with it. We can never understand ourselves or see ourselves rightly until we understand just *how* “of the earth” we are. This teaches us humility. It should teach us humility especially whenever we open our mouths to speak of heavenly things – like we’re doing this morning.

“Even” John the Baptist was himself of the earth, and therefore of the earth he was, and of the earth *he spoke*. It’s in this light that John the Apostle intends for us to hear the first words of this verse:

**II. John 3:31a — He who comes from above is above all.** He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way.

Or, “He who comes from above, above all He is.” This is a wonderful mystery. John is speaking of the *incarnate* Christ – the “enfleshed” Son of God. He’s speaking of Jesus, who walked and talked in person with His disciples. Even though this Jesus—as a true man with a true body and reasonable soul—was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary and born of her, yet *He*—this Jesus—is a divine *Person* whose true *origin* is from above *and not* from this earth. Therefore, since He comes from above (*anohen*), above all (*epano panton*) He is (*estin*). Can you see how pointless it is to ask how far above all He is? He is as far above us as heaven itself is above the earth. The point here is not that He is distant from us or is not related to us because John is speaking of the incarnate Christ who even calls us “brothers” (Heb. 2:11) and who said before He ascended into heaven, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mat. 28:20). The point is rather His infinite preeminence and superiority (cf. Lk. 19:17) as the one man in all the history of the world who is not of this earth, but who has come from above.

The word for “from above” is *anohen*. That’s the same word Jesus used at the beginning of this chapter when He said to Nicodemus: “Unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God... You must be born from above” (3:3, 7). And so we see that the only way to be born “from above” is to be united with that one who is Himself “from above.” And we are united with that one who is from above by the Holy Spirit who works in us faith in Christ (to be born from above, Jesus says, is to be born of the Spirit; cf. 3:5, 8). And yet even though we’ve been born from above in and through our union with the one who is from above, there always remains this essential distinction: He alone *comes from* above and therefore above all *He* is, but we remain forever creatures who are “of the earth” and therefore of the earth we are. And therefore, too, of the earth we speak. Not so with Jesus:

**III. John 3:31c–32 — He who comes from heaven is above all.** He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.

Can we feel in our hearts how this really is the ultimate tragedy – that when the one who is from heaven bears witness to what He has seen and heard, no one receives His testimony? Can we not see the folly of this – that we who are of the earth and wholly conditioned by this creaturely and earthly existence, should not receive the testimony of the one who comes from above and who bears witness to what He has seen and heard? And yet we know that when John says “no one,” he’s not speaking absolutely, but only generally, in light of the reality that apart from that new birth *from above*, no one *will* receive His testimony – the testimony of the one who comes *from above*. This is why John can go on to say in verse 33:

**IV. John 3:33** — Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.

Is there anything that could be more obvious or self-evident than that *God is true*? Therefore, says John, there could be nothing more obvious or self-evident than that the testimony of Jesus is true – not just in the sense of being accurate and according to reality, but “true” even in the sense of containing and giving all that it promises. Whoever receives the testimony of Jesus, the one who comes from above, sets his seal to this, that God is true. Will any one of us boast about setting *our* seal to the truth of God when by default the only other option is to call God a liar (cf. 1 Jn. 5:10)? When we set our seal to this, that God is true, it’s not God who “benefits” but rather *us* who have the joy of being conformed not to what is false and a lie, but rather to *Him* who is true.

But how is it that receiving the testimony of the one who comes from above is so bound up with the “trueness” of God Himself? John answers:

**V. John 3:34a** — For he whom God has sent speaks the words of God...

Who did God send? On the one hand, we can say that God sent the eternal and preincarnate Son into the world.

➤ John 1:1, 4 — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God the Word was... And the Word [that was with God and that was God] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And yet John is speaking here not just of the pre-incarnate Son, but of the incarnate, “enfleshed” Son. Because two whole, perfect, and distinct natures (deity and humanity) have been inseparably joined together and united in one divine person, our Lord Jesus Christ, therefore John can speak even of the incarnate, enfleshed Son as *the one* who came from above and who was “sent” by God. Therefore, it’s only in light of the true *humanity* of this one *divine* person that we can fully understand these words: “For *He* whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for He [God] gives [to the *incarnate Son* whom He has sent] the Spirit without measure.” These are realities in which the eternal salvation of our souls is rooted.

Didn’t John the Baptist also speak the words of God? There’s certainly a sense in which he did as a prophet who was sent from God. And yet there was also this qualitative difference: Even as He spoke the words of God he was still speaking *as* one who was of or from the earth. Being of

the earth, John the Baptist was not testifying to anything that he himself had seen or heard in the counsels of heaven. Even in his speaking of the words of God, he could not by that word make fully known the true realities of redemption. Later when the Apostles spoke and wrote under the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ, they were ultimately speaking the word of Christ – the word that Christ spoke. While they still spoke as those wholly conditioned by their creaturely and earthly existence, yet they were speaking now, under divine inspiration, the word of the *incarnate* Son who, though He is fully human, is *not* “of the earth” but who comes from above. It is, therefore, the word of Christ that is qualitatively different from the word of any other – not in the sense that the prophetic or apostolic word is any less true or authoritative, but rather in the sense that when He speaks, He speaks *as* one—the only one—who Himself comes from above – who bears witness to what He (the incarnate Son) has Himself seen and heard. But there’s more that John says here, isn’t there?

**VI. John 3:34b** — For he whom God has sent speaks the words of God, **for he [God] gives [to him (the *incarnate* Son)] the Spirit without measure.**

This giving of the Spirit is not the giving associated with regeneration and the new birth but rather the giving associated with an empowering and enabling to fulfill a specific calling or office.

- Exodus 35:30–33 — Then Moses said to the people of Israel, “See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every skilled craft.
- Judges 3:10 (cf. 11:29) — The Spirit of the LORD was upon [Othniel], and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand.
- Judges 6:34 — The Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon...
- 1 Samuel 16:13 (cf. Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14) — Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed [David] in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward.

It was in a very special way that the prophetic office depended upon the giving of the Spirit. It was only by the Spirit of God that the prophet could speak the words of God. So we read in Numbers:

- Numbers 11:25 — The LORD... took some of the Spirit that was on [Moses] and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied.

David testified in this way:

- 2 Samuel 23:2 (cf. Mat. 22:43; Acts 1:16; 4:25) — The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.

The Apostle Peter writes:

- 2 Peter 1:21 — No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist, too, was given the Spirit so that he might be enabled to fulfill the task that he had been given. The angel Gabriel said to Zechariah:

- Luke 1:13, 15–17 — “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

In all of these cases God gave the Spirit by measure; in direct proportion to the task that He had assigned. The task that He had assigned never required more than a measure of the Spirit. If this was true of the prophets who spoke from God and even of John the Baptist, how much more must this be true of us. Paul writes in Romans:

- Romans 12:3 — By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each **according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.**

And then in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 4:7 — Grace was given to each one of us **according to the measure of Christ’s gift.**

In every other case God gave the Spirit by measure; in proportion to the task that He had assigned—because the task that He had assigned never required more than a measure of that infinite power of the Spirit which is the power of God Himself. But what was the task assigned to Jesus, the *incarnate* Son? His task was to speak never on His own authority, but always and only what He had been taught and commanded by His Father (cf. Jn. 8:28; 12:49). His task, as the one who had taken upon Himself the frailty and weakness of human flesh living in a sin-cursed world, was to be *even in that flesh*, both in word and in deed, the exact representation of God (cf. Jn. 14:10) so that to see *Him*—even in servant form (cf. Phil. 2:7)—was to see the *Father* (cf. Jn. 14:7, 9) and to hear *Him* was to hear the *Father*. On the one hand, as the eternal Son, Jesus was from all eternity and in His own nature the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature (cf. Heb. 1:2-3). On the other hand, as the incarnate Son, the Son clothed in the weakness and frailty of flesh and blood (cf. Heb. 2:14), this *same* Jesus required nothing less than the Holy Spirit of God given to Him *without measure* if He was to fulfill that calling of being in word and in deed the exact representation and the full manifestation of the Father in all His saving love and power. Think about this: The task that the Father assigned to Jesus was the only task in all the history of the world that *could ever* demand for its fulfillment not just a measure of the Spirit, but the Spirit given “without measure” – all of the infinite and boundless resources of the almighty power of God Himself. And so the Apostle John writes: “He

whom God has sent speaks [perfectly and fully and only and always] the words of God, for he [God] gives [to Him] the Spirit *without measure*.”

And then we read in verse 35:

**VII. John 3:35** — The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

What can this mean?

It is the Father’s will that we should worship Him by worshiping His incarnate Son. It is the Father’s will that we should come to Him by coming to His Son – who has taken to Himself our true and full humanity. It is the Father’s will that salvation be found only in His Son whom he loves and to whom He has given the Spirit without measure and into whose hand He has given all things (cf. LBCF 8.3). We remember the cloud that overshadowed Jesus and Peter, and James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration and the voice that came out of the cloud and said:

➤ Mark 9:7 — “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

And we remember the last words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel:

➤ Matthew 28:18 — “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

“It is on account of [the Father’s love for] the Son, the Son’s authority over all things, and his being endowed with the Spirit (‘not by measure’) that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is absolute, all-embracing, and all-sufficient and that ‘outside him salvation is not to be sought or found.’” (Ridderbos) Indeed, it is also on account of these same things that any failure to receive the testimony of Christ and to believe in the Father’s only Son whom He sent into the world is, by default, to call God a liar and so to remain under the wrath of God. So John concludes:

**VIII. John 3:36** — Whoever believes in *the Son* [whoever receives His testimony] has eternal life; whoever does not obey *the Son* [whoever does not believe in Him and receive His testimony] shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

In light of all that we’ve seen this morning, how could it possibly be otherwise? God’s wrath is the personal response of a holy God to a rebellious, sinful, fallen world (cf. Eph. 2:3; 5:6) that refuses to receive the Son whom He loves and into whose hand He has given all things (cf. Carson). This is why the Apostle Paul can write in 2 Thessalonians chapter one:

➤ 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8 — ...the Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

And the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter chapter four:

- 1 Peter 4:17 — For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

But even as John concludes with this warning, his goal is to call sinners to repentance; to repent of their disobedience and to believe in the Son—because “whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life.” Whoever believes in Him who comes from above has been born already into that life that will one day be consummated at the resurrection. Have you received His testimony? Have you set your seal to this, that God is *true*?