

## INTRODUCTION

This part of the gospel is about John Baptist's handover to Jesus. John was the well-known one; Jesus was only becoming known. John was tempted by some of his friends to cling onto his position. This story is about how he faced that challenge, and what he said about himself and about Christ Jesus.

## THE CHALLENGE JOHN FACED

John's challenge was similar to the challenge Jesus had faced in the wilderness temptations. It was about his identity and his supposed rights. When his followers saw that John was losing disciples to Jesus they thought he was undervalued and wanted him to assert himself. Their response was similar. Both Jesus and John acted on the basis of God's Word. Jesus had not clung to his rights as the Son of God but became a servant; and John did not cling to his position but acted faithfully as Jesus' servant.

The fact that the challenge came from his friends must have made it more difficult. They lamented the fact that people were leaving John for Jesus. They were the people who valued his teaching, who affirmed him, and who loved him. They were all he had - apart from God's Word. To use Jesus' words: he could 'save his life' asserting himself and keeping his supporters, or he could 'lose his life' and get his reward from Christ alone. Ultimately, it was a challenge to his faith in God.

His response was to act on the basis of God's Word. He explained his actions by telling his followers about himself and about Christ.

## WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HIMSELF

He showed he was humble and joyful, grateful for what God had given him and lived in hope for the future.

His followers had an inflated sense of his importance. He said, "A man can receive nothing unless it is given him from heaven." His person and his position were not the same. He held his position only by God's will and for God's purposes. As a person he was no more important than any other. He would live on, but his position would pass away. Indeed, he would prove to be a worthless person if he clung to his position in disobedience to God who appointed him and subsequently removed him. He would lose much more than his position. Any honour we have also comes from God. We will retain it only as long as we keep in his will. When King Saul defied God he lost his honour, as did Satan before him. John's temptation was similar to that of Jesus.

He had consistently told his followers that he was not the Christ but had been sent to prepare for the Christ. Both of those things emphasised the importance of Christ Jesus.

He described his position as that of "the Bridegroom's friend". That showed John's care for Christ's interests. His work was to prepare people for Christ and bring them to him. It also showed his care for Christ's people. That must be the case as part of his loyalty to Christ. Those who love Christ inevitably care for those he loves.

Since Christ had appeared John was joyful. It was the presence of one he loved. It was also bringing about Christ's joy when his "bride" would become his. Far from regretting his loss of position John saw it as a mark of success and reason for joy.

His role was bound to be temporary. Nevertheless he was still the friend of Christ - that would not change. We should learn from that. Our worth and wellbeing do not depend on work or status. They come from the love of God. They are only maintained if we remain in his love and do not try to become independent of him.

## WHAT HE SAID ABOUT CHRIST JESUS

He described Christ Jesus as "the Bridegroom"; he had a unique relationship with the people. He also explained the background to that; it has to do with his relationship with God the Father. Jesus is "from above", John said. He had come from God - a divine Person and sent by his Father. He is superior to all who are "from the earth" both as a person and in his mission. John said Jesus had the Spirit of God without measure (or limit). When he spoke he did not utter thoughts that originated among men but the very words of God. He spoke what he "heard" from God the Father. He understood and shared God's love for humanity. When he expressed that it was really God calling people to return to his family.

John spoke about the Father's love for Christ Jesus. Because of that the Father had "given all things into his hands". The Bible speaks about Jesus being heir of all things. He is head of the Father's household and appointed to judge. But especially the Father has given Christ a people to be his in a special way (see John 17:6). That is the context in which John describes him as "the Bridegroom". Like John caring for Christ's Bride, Christ loves those whom the Father loves. The difference is - they now belong to Christ, they never belonged to John.

In the Old Testament God often used the illustration of husband and wife to describe his love for his people (e.g. Hosea). The New Testament also uses this illustration (Ephesians 5:25-33). The term speaks of a deep and lasting love. When we hear about it our reaction may be to say, "We did not know." This means the gospel is far more than a belief, and we ought to respond to it.

It speaks of a desire for us. God conversed with humanity in the Garden of Eden. He made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Jesus spoke of God rejoicing when people return to him (Luke 15).

It speaks of incomparable care and kindness. That should give a wonderful sense of security.

It speaks of an incomparable closeness. The New Testament uses the expression "one spirit with the Lord" (1 Corinthians 6:17). He knows our heart (but only in love) and we can know his.

Together we can be productive of good, bearing fruit that pleases God (John 15:1-11).

The Bible story leads on to "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:6-9). That is the ultimate purpose of the gospel as it calls people to Christ. That is the ultimate purpose of the Holy Spirit's work in the original creation and in the new creation.

## CONCLUSION

It is a privilege to be "the Bridegroom's friend" as John Baptist was. It is a far greater privilege for the Bridegroom Christ to call us by his gospel and share his love with us forever.