



INTRO:

So I wanna do something a little different today. Typically, you know my method in teaching you is to generally spend a significant portion of the week praying and studying the Scripture at-hand, so that when we get together like this, I can help you, not only, see what it meant in it's original context, BUT see how every verse, every passage, character and story ultimately, as Sally Lloyd Jones said, "*whispers Jesus' name.*" In other words, help you see that the Bible isn't just a book of rules, though there's certainly rules in it. Nor is it a book of history or even heroes, though both of those things are in it too. Rather, that it's really a giant love letter AND adventure story about a TRUE hero, who's lovingly come from a far country, to win back His lost treasure. That's generally the method behind the madness! Open the Scriptures > Help you see what they mean/how they point to Jesus > And THEN invite you to consider what it looks like for you to TRUST Jesus and live OUT that trust with your Missional Family and within your spheres of influence... TODAY, I wanna reverse that. Cuz I wanna invite you to START by considering your heart/your life/the circumstances, frustrations, disappointments, fears, maybe you've brought in here with you today - because we all have! And instead of asking, "*what does this passage mean for me today,*" I wanna encourage you to, as we're going THROUGH it ask, "*WHERE you see yourself IN it.*" And consequently "*What God might be inviting you to believe and obey today.*"

And that's BECAUSE what **John 3:22-36** does is show you 3 REALLY important things that get at the root of ALL our frustration, fear, division, lack of peace, and so-forth. It shows us **The Natural Condition of Our Hearts from which all our problems come.** **Second**, it gives us **A Picture of a Transformed Heart that's able to live at rest/peace and with joy, no matter what's going on around you/something**, I believe we ALL want. And **Third**, it shows you **How You Can GET That Transformed Heart**... So let's pray and then consider this passage under the heading of those 3 things. **Let's Pray:** "*Lord Jesus, it is beyond dispute that we are easily tossed to and fro. We like to think of ourselves as competent and in control, but the reality is: the moment we perceive our competency or control to in any way be diminishing; we're wrecked. Instead of being, as Jeremiah 17:8 describes, "like a tree planted by water, that...does not fear when heat comes, and is not anxious in the year of drought, (but rather continues) to bear fruit," we're more like tumble-weeds tossed about by every difficult conversation, drop in job performance, critical comment, economic downturn, or the like! We have a heart problem. And so I pray that you would, not only, help us see ourselves in this passage, but IN seeing ourselves, have our hearts transformed this morning. Oh, we pray this in your name Jesus...Amen!*"

TEXT:¹

3 Things this passage shows you: **First, The Natural - and problematic - Condition of Our Hearts**, which you see there in **vv.22-26**. Because notice, this passage opens with a bit of intrigue **right?** And not in some sinister kind of way, but really in a way that, if you've been following

¹ Works consulted:

- "He Must Increase" - Kevin Sanders - 11/24/19 - <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/sermons-from-seven-mile-waltham/id1253500100?i=1000457731969>
- "The Goat Comes From Above" - Larkcast - 7/19/22 - <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/larkcast/id1339351918?i=1000570453101>
- "The Freedom Of Self-Forgetfulness" - Timothy Keller, 2012, Kindle Edition.
- "Witness - Gospel of John, Part 1" - Jan 13, 1991 - Jn 3:22-36 - Timothy J. Keller, *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).
- "He Must Become Greater; I Must Become Less" - Jn 3:22-30 - R.Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 88-89.
- <https://jdgreear.com/it-starts-with-surrender/>

John's Gospel to this point, is pretty expected. You recall John opened ch.1 putting forth this great theological treatise of who Jesus is as the God-Man. Called him "*the light*" and "*the one in whom is all life.*" REVEALED Jesus! Such that once Jesus was revealed, we then began to see Him rise to prominence **right?** John the Baptist pointed to Him, disciples started following Him, and Jesus took His ministry PUBLIC with various signs and sayings, so that naturally the PUBLICITY surrounding Jesus grew...to the point you see here, that His ministry of "*baptism,*" as v.22 calls it, began to overlap with John the Baptist's. So catch the scene: What used to be JUST John ministering is NOW John and JESUS ministering. Cuz of course, John's ministry of pointing people to Jesus didn't just end when Jesus showed up. It wasn't like John saw Jesus and suddenly went, "*aight. I'm clocking out.*" No! He kept pointing people to Jesus, so that what naturally began to occur was John's ministry shrank as Jesus' grew! And yet, really the only difference between em, according to **John 4:2**, is that Jesus didn't personally administer baptism like John did. Rather, His Disciples did it under His authority...So WITH these corresponding ministries, ya naturally get, as v.25 shows, "*discussions*" - and REALLY discussions, you see, that center on the legitimacy OF these respective ministries. Cuz here was the thing: John's disciples were obviously concerned! They tell John, "*Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom YOU bore witness - he's baptizing, and all are going to him.*" They're concerned/worried. Cuz they're seeing John lose followers and influence. Ministry metrics are going down. Profit margins are diminishing. Momentum is slipping!...Let me ask: **How would you respond/how DO you respond in similar situations?** Maybe not seeing your ministry shrink - though I could speak to that - But maybe when you hear the stock market's gone down...again? Or you get news that a loved-one is ill? What about when you get laid off, fired OR just don't get the job in the first place. Basically, how do ya respond when ANYONE/ANYTHING of significance in your life - instead of it progressing, growing, developing...stalls, shrinks or even dies?...Cuz that's the predicament John faced, which his disciples were bringing to His attention!

But notice: The WAY they bring it to his attention, actually reveals their hearts. Cuz ya see, they don't come to John with a question of concern **do they?** No! They come with a statement! "*Rabbi...EVERYONE'S going to Jesus!*" Now of course that's an exaggeration, cuz not EVERYONE was going to Jesus. John was obviously still baptizing people. But this is what we do when we get frustrated or scared **right?** We get prone to hyperbole. Someone asks you how your day was and maybe you received a bad performance review at work or something. *What do you say?* "*Ahh it was the WORST day ever!*" We exaggerate. **Not to mention**, John's disciples are so shaken by the ministry seemingly deteriorating that there's a sense in which they're, honestly, wrestling with whether or not they should continue to be a part of it. Cuz sadly, while they APPEAR to be siding with John by essentially bad-mouthing Jesus - calling Him "*the One to whom YOU bore witness,*" meaning the guy they think only has a platform cuz John gave Him His big break; you see, they also refer to John in a very impersonal way - simply call him, "*Rabbi*" - by his title. **Why?** Because they're slowly distancing themselves from him! Cuz frankly, the ministry is no longer going according their wishes!...And let's be clear, John's disciples had known from day one that the ministry was singularly about Jesus. And YET they still see Jesus as a threat. So CLEARLY, this isn't an issue of the head, but of the heart. As **Luke 6:45** says, "*out of the abundance of our heart, the mouth speaks.*" It's one thing to say you trust

and live for Jesus when ministry, marriage, business is good...It's quite another, when it costs you something! THAT'S when what's REALLY in your heart/your idols...come out. And by idols I mean not some little totem pole you bow down to, but rather those things in your life that aren't necessarily bad things/they may even be good things like, in this case, ministry success, BUT which have BECOME "God-things" - things that possess ultimate value and thereby determine your happiness. THAT'S an idol!

And Friends, ya gotta understand: idols/idols of the heart are incredibly problematic: **One**, they disrupt your relationship with others. I mean John's disciples here are willing to gossip and backbite their own...BECAUSE when you're harboring an idol, and others in ANYWAY infringe on that idol, in this case by joining another ministry, those very people become threats to your happiness...Consequently, harboring idols necessarily pits you against people. It disrupts your relationships with others...**Two**, it disrupts your relationship with yourself. Cuz CLEARLY, John's disciples aren't at peace. They're filled with all kinds of bitterness. And that's BECAUSE idols never truly satisfy or last. So when you DON'T have what you think you need to be happy, you get worried, impatient, angry **right?** And when you DO, very often, you get fearful or controlling because you know you could lose that thing at any moment... Idolatry disrupts your relationship with yourself...And then **Three**/most importantly, idols disrupt your relationship with God, BECAUSE they put you at odds with God by leading you to call "bad" or "good" what God calls "good" or "bad." In this case, these disciples are literally calling JESUS... "bad." **You see?** Idols ALWAYS disappoint and often destructively so. And sadly, the **natural condition of our hearts** - going all the way back to Adam and Eve, who believed they could find happiness outside of God, is to pursue idols. As John Calvin said, "*our hearts are idol factories constantly churning out new ones.*" **What are your idols? Cuz that's the Natural Condition of Our Hearts.**

Second, this passage gives us **A Picture of a Transformed Heart**. And you see it in John's response to his disciples there in **vv.27-30**. Cuz let's be honest: for most of us the prospect of losing our position, our platform, our passion, that would devastate! And I'd venture to say that NONE of us have or ever will experience it at the level John was experiencing it. Cuz understand, John's whole life was wrapped up in his ministry. **Luke 1** tells us that even before John came out of his mother Elizabeth's womb, when Elizabeth was near her cousin Mary, the mother of Jesus who was pregnant at the same time - John lept in his mother's womb. Even as a pre-born baby, just being near Jesus got John excited. Talk about an early start to your career! Not to mention, from just a worldly perspective, John was, as Andrew Byers says in his book *John the Baptist and Celebrity Culture*, "*a MAJOR celebrity in the ancient world. Hordes flocked to him from a broad geographical range. His following was immense even though his ministry base - in the wilderness - was counterintuitive, and his clothing - camel's hair - was a far cry from designer jeans and preacher sneakers.*"² The guy was a rockstar! And here he is watching it all slowly evaporate, which you would THINK would just absolutely **wreck** him... And YET, you see the EXACT opposite! For example, he utterly **trusts that God is sovereign!** Says, "*A person can't receive even one thing unless it's given to him from heaven.*"...Imagine,

² Andrew Byers, in his book "John the Baptist and Celebrity Culture" The Gospel Coalition. Accessed Oct 20, 2013 <www. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2013/10/07/john-the-baptist-celebrity-culture/>

being able to look at not only all the good things you have, but even all the BAD, and know they've come from God. As **James 1:17** and **Job 1:21** say respectively, *"EVERY good gift and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation."* And *"The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."* Imagine the peace/even tranquility of heart you'd have if you knew that even when those people or things you most treasure; diminish or depart; that it's not by accident. But rather it's from the sovereign and loving hand of God... You say, *"how can that be? How could cancer, job loss, poverty, abuse EVER be good."* And it's a great question/TOUGH question, and to be honest, I don't know if I can answer it in full other than to say, as Tim Keller has, *"If you've got an infinite God big enough to be MAD at for the suffering in your life/in the world, then you also have an infinite God BIG enough to have reasons for it that you and I can't think of."*³ As **Isaiah 55** says, *"God's thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways (His) ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are (God's) ways higher than your ways and (His) thoughts than your thoughts."* You understand, faith is not just blindly trusting. Rather, it's holding to the character and promises of God EVEN WHEN your circumstances might tell you otherwise. Like holding onto that bar across your seat on rollercoaster. That's what John's doing! As one person said, *"(he's realizing that) the answer to worry is not a trouble free-life, or invulnerable future, but a relationship with the God who controls time and who promises that not even a hair falls from your head without his knowledge and permission."* He trusts God's sovereign goodness!

But too, he's **secure in his identity!** He says, *"You yourselves bear me witness/know, that I said, 'I'm not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'"* You understand, when your identity is secure, EVERYTHING can shift around you and you still remain steady and stable! I've shared this illustration with you before, but it's like if you're a billionaire. If you someone picks your pocket of \$100, that stinks, but it's like a finger prick. BUT if all you have to your name is \$200 and someone picks your pocket of \$100, that's devastating. That's like a knife to the heart. Same amount of money. Same crime. Totally different outcome. **Why?** Because of your identity! You have to know who you are by knowing who God SAYS you are. Cuz even though it's popular to assume: You can't actually create your own identity. Rather, you have to receive an identity. God has made us as social creatures, so you can't just "bless yourself," as it were and say, ya know, *"here's who I'm gonna be and I don't care what anybody else thinks."* It doesn't work that way. The very reason you're wanting to forge an identity in the first place is precisely BECAUSE you DO care what other people think/we all do. If you don't, you're a sociopath.

There's this hilarious scene in the movie *Bridget Jones's Diary* where Bridget makes these notes to herself, cuz she's trying to forge her own identity. And they say things like, *"Buy books by unreadable literary authors to put impressively on shelves. THEN develop inner poise, authority, and sense of self as a woman...complete...without boyfriend...since that's the very best way...to obtain boyfriend."* **What's she saying?** She's saying, *"I gotta appear smart, put together, and like I don't need a boyfriend, BECAUSE if ya need a boyfriend, ya won't get a boyfriend."* So you have to act like you DON'T need a boyfriend in order to HAVE a boyfriend. **You see the**

³ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/tim-keller-on-how-to-provide-a-rational-justification-for-the-christian-faith.html>

conundrum? You can't create an identity for yourself. You can only RECEIVE one... And Friend, the only received-identity that's stable enough to support the weight of your soul is an identity based on who GOD says you are! THAT'S what John is going back to here. Saying, *"I'm not the Christ, but I am here to point TO the Christ."* You hear the combo of both humility - *"I'm not the Christ/I must decrease"* - and almost like chutzpah - *"BUT God has ordained me to point TO Christ/help HIM increase."* John knows who He is BECAUSE He knows who God's SAID He is. And as a result, he's not only free from being tossed about apparent ministry failure, but he's free to set his attention on what really matters. Honestly, John is a kind of living **picture** of **Psalm 46**: *"...though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, (I) will not fear...Be still, and know that I am God."* **Isn't that the kind of heart with which we all wanna live?** Of course!

Which is WHY, **Finally**, you gotta see that this passage shows you **How To GET the kind of Heart**. And ya see it in **vv.31-36**, where ya notice, John - not the Baptist but the Gospel writer - BREAKS from talking ABOUT John the Baptist to, essentially, summarize all of ch. 3. You remember last week - through the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus - John told us that salvation or *"being born again"* comes from simply SURRENDERING to Christ/that through faith in Christ, we get God's very life/His Holy Spirit implanted into us. Well notice, JOHN uses very similar language again here, even reiterating Jesus' divine authority saying that, *"He comes from heaven above," "is above all,"* that *"He's been sent by God,"* such that *"He utters the very words OF God,"* given that He's full of the Spirit *"without measure."* EVEN that *"He's loved by the Father and has been given all things into His hand."* What this means is that when you look at Jesus, you're not looking at merely a good man, or even a great historical teacher. You're looking at the very face of God...or as John says, *"the one who bears witness to what He's seen and heard."* And we all know what a **"witness"** is **right?** A **"witness"** is a person who doesn't just bring a little bit of clarity to things, but brings real authority! For a witness to be admissible in court, they can't bring hearsay evidence. They have to be someone who's actually seen or heard the things about which they're talking. THAT'S Jesus! Every other religious teacher - you understand - gives hearsay evidence. *"This is what to do. The rules you have to follow. The rituals you gotta perform,"* and so forth. Only Jesus though, both declared and displayed divine, eye-witness testimony. Only Jesus you could say, has the viewpoint of eternity...He's like one of those news station helicopters above the highway, where YOU'RE stuck in traffic and getting all upset, and sorta mumblin' under your breath, *"what is wrong. Why won't people speed up."* And you're doing that/we ALL do BECAUSE we don't have the vantage point of the helicopter **right?** If we did/if you knew what those pilots knew, you wouldn't be so crazed...JESUS is the ultimate pilot/has that vantage point...to the extreme...And so John's saying, *"If that's true then there's only two ways then you can respond TO Jesus."* EITHER you can, as he says, *"not receive Jesus' testimony,"* which just shows that you think you're sufficient for controlling your life, and that you're essential, and that ESSENTIALLY you believe yourself to be on the same level as Jesus OR you can, as he says, *"believe in the Son for eternal life BY receiving his testimony and setting (your) seal to this, that God is true/"* or telling the truth! **Do you know what it means to "set your seal" to something?** It means to totally bind and commit yourself. In ancient times, Kings would wear signet rings that they'd dip in wax and press onto paper in order

to mark their official seal. If a document was “set with the seal” of the King then it meant it was binding and that the King was bound TO it! So when John says, you can either NOT receive Jesus and His testimony OR you can “*set your seal*” to it, what He’s saying is, there’s no middle ground.

Listen: If you wanna not just be “born again”/enjoy eternal life, but in the meantime, live with a heart that’s able to weather the ups & downs of life, and those seasons in which the people and things you hold most dear diminish or even die, then you gotta decide...not just if you “believe” in Jesus, as in mentally assent to Him, but if you’re absolutely committed-to Him. Surrendered-over to Him! As one persona said, “*you gotta decide if you’re gonna put your ‘yes’ on the table even before God asks the question.*” “*God, I don’t even know the question, but my answer is: I’m all-in! I’m not gonna have any conditions with you, cuz I’ve ‘set my seal’ to your truth!*” You say, “*that’s pretty radical.*” It is! Cuz the way most of us tend to approach God is WITH conditions. “*Jesus I’ll obey...BUT...*” Or not even that we say “No” to God - at least not at first - but just, “*God, thanks for the advice...I’ll take it from here.*” In other words, we reserve a kind of veto power to ignore or simply tweak anything from God we don’t like!

It reminds me of Driver’s Ed in high school. When I was learning to drive, my instructor had this special car with an added brake pedal on the passenger side. So even though I was behind the wheel, he always had that brake. And maybe my instructor was particularly annoying/or maybe I was particularly bad driver/I don’t know, but EVERY time I did something he didn’t like, he’d SLAM that pedal. So what was going on in that car was: I was “in control” - most of the time - but ultimately, I didn’t get the final say. The instructor had veto power. And if you have veto power, YOU’RE still in charge...Friends, that’s EXACTLY how we tend to interact with God. We let him drive the car of our lives...most of the time. But the moment He does something we don’t like, BAM! We slam on the brakes!...***Is that your posture toward God?*** Because if it is, Jesus says very clearly here that that’s NOT “*receiving His testimony,*” NOT “*setting your seal to His truth,*” and NOT ultimately “*believing in Him.*” And AS SUCH “*the wrath of God*” - the settled displeasure of God - “*remains on you!*” And not cuz God is about some impersonal PRINCIPAL of retribution, but precisely BECAUSE He’s a holy PERSONAL God, who must, not only punish sin, but who’s willing to give you what you’re saying you actually want in your sin/in your distrust...which is to be away from Him, and navigating the storms on your own!

Maybe Friend, the reason joy, a transformed heart, the ability to live like John the Baptist eludes you...is because you’re EITHER refusing to receive Jesus as your Savior, perhaps cuz you think there’s some better life out there for you than the life that comes from the Giver OF all life... OR...you’re simply refusing to “*set your seal*” on Him, which is to say, lay aside your conditions and half-measures. EITHER way, you’re not ***worshipping*** Him. Which means, you’ll always, in some way, be ***wrecked*** when what you treasure gets taken from you...BUT if what you treasure most is Christ, cuz you’re committed to Him in light of how He committed to you in His death and resurrection, then even when those things you treasure get taken away, you’ll NEVER be ***wrecked***, because JESUS will never be taken away from you, and YOU can never be taken from Him!...Friends, come to Him this morning! ***Worship*** Him! Lay down your

conditions. Since, as John says, “*you belong to earth. He comes from above, is above all,*” and therefore has the best vantage point FOR your life! Let HIM “*increase*” as you “*decrease,*” and then watch as He begins to, maybe not transform all your circumstances, but transform your heart in the MIDST OF your circumstances. ***Worship Him and be not Wrecked! ...Let's Pray:*** “*Lord Jesus, in a moment, as we take up the offering, and reflect together, we pray that you would, as the Psalmist says, ‘Search (us), O God, and know (our) hearts! Try (us) and know (our) thoughts! See if there be any grievous ways in (us)’ - any ways in which we aren't receiving you as Savior or ‘setting our seal’ upon you. THEN we will be ‘lead me in the way everlasting!’ We pray this in your name...!’*” **(STOP RECORD)**