

The Joy of Being Occupied with Christ, Part 1

By David Harrell

Bible Text: John 3:22-36

Preached on: Sunday, January 5, 2014

This morning I have the great joy of speaking to you about the joy of being occupied with Christ and we will learn about this amazing concept, looking into John's gospel, chapter 3. This morning we will examine verses 22-30, but I would like to read through verse 36 because ultimately this will be part 1 of a 2 part study of this text. As you know, prior to Christmas, we were going verse-by-verse through the gospel of John. Now we are returning to that. Follow along as I read beginning in verse 22 of John 3.

“22 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized - 24 for John had not yet been thrown into prison. 25 Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification. 26 And they came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have borne witness, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.’ 27 John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, “I am not the Christ,” but, “I have been sent ahead of Him.” 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease. 31 He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 What He has seen and heard, of that He bears witness; and no one receives His witness. 33 He who has received His witness has set his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. 36 He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

May God add his blessing to the reading of this word.

I have found that the Spirit of God has provided for me personally deep nourishment to my soul through this passage of Scripture and I pray that the same will occur for you this morning. Here, the Spirit reveals some actual history that took place during the transition between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. We read of the last Old Testament prophet, the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ, John the Baptist and how his ministry is being transitioned into Christ's ministry, the one who would do away with the Old and inaugurate the New.

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You will recall that the Old Covenant was given to Israel, made with Israel, on Mount Sinai and it was given to them to reveal the holiness of God, to reveal his perfect righteousness, all that he demanded, to reveal to his people that they were to be selfless and sacrificial in their love for God and love for man. Therefore, God's law exposed their sin as it exposes our sin. It exposed their inability to in any way meet the standard and, therefore, it exposed to all of us our desperate need for a Savior, for a righteousness beyond our own, for a Savior who would be the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, the Apostle Paul said in Galatians 3:24, "The law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ so that we may be justified by faith."

But woven into the fabric of this historical narrative and the words of John the Baptist, we are going to find some immensely practical truths. We are going to discover the danger of envy and jealousy in Christian service. We are going to learn how to respond when it would appear to us that our ministry is not as popular as someone else's. We're going to learn why some folks never seem to be able to grasp some of the obvious doctrines in Scripture. We will learn a powerful principle about how to prevent the flesh from robbing us of the exhilarating joy of being occupied with Christ. We will learn the secret to humility, one that as you will see, is seldom understood yet is crucial for our effectiveness in service and our joy in Christ. We will gain keen insights into the danger of measuring spiritual results on the basis of outward appearances. We will discover why so many people reject the testimony of Christ, even many people who claim to know and love him. And John will ultimately describe why Christ is superior to him and all who proclaim him. Finally, we will be reminded of the wrath of God that abides on all who refuse to believe on the Son of God.

So, with all this in mind, let's make sure we understand the context of what's happening here. By the time Jesus came to earth, Israel's devotion to the burdensome law that God had given them had really degenerated into nothing more than just a mechanical, hypocritical, superficial conformity to ceremonies, to rituals, to various rules and many of them, ridiculous rules and regulations that the rabbis had imposed upon them. Their religion was basically a sham but like all forms of legalism, it gave them the illusion of spirituality and a false sense of salvation. For them, salvation was purely by works: as long as we keep the law, then we are good with God. And so, their superficial external religion really fanned the flames of their pride into a red hot furnace of hatred toward the gospel of grace that basically exposed the foolishness of all that they were doing.

Obviously, they hated the Lord Jesus Christ. They failed to understand the purpose and the glory of the law and that was to see it as God's provision to literally drive them to the Savior, to drive them to a place of crying out for mercy, to look to the Messiah who would be the one that would bring in a New Covenant. 600 years before this, Jeremiah had spoken of this New Covenant. We read about it in Jeremiah 31, beginning in verse 31. God says this through his servant, "Behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those

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days, declares the LORD, I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, Know the LORD, for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, declares the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Of course, this New Covenant promise was also announced by Christ and ultimately the beginning of the fulfillment of that covenant began in the early days of the church and is continuing to this day but the ultimate fruition of these promises will not be realized until the Lord returns, until the millennial reign of the Messiah. But we know that even now, a remnant chosen by grace according to what Paul said in Romans 11:5, even now we are seeing this begin to happen. But ultimately, at the end, we will see the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant and the Davidic Covenant all being merged together in the fulfillment of the New Covenant during the millennium.

Now, as we come to John 3, we are seeing this transition from the Old to the New. As the last prophet under the Old Covenant, John the Baptist is preaching what was once shrouded in mystery. The Jews didn't fully understand these things. They saw symbols and types, they heard prophesy, they knew that there were things going on with ceremonies but they didn't fully understand it all until the New Covenant comes along and now Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant, a covenant that would be ratified by his sacrificial death on the cross.

You will recall previously to where we're at here in John 3, that Jesus has just exposed the hypocrisy of Old Covenant externalism and the folly of self-righteousness to the most influential teacher of all Israel, to a man named Nicodemus. He revealed to him the liberating, the energizing power, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit when a man is born again, when he believes the gospel. Now, John the Baptist's ministry is overlapping the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ during this transitional phase. But you must understand: in no way did John the Baptist see Jesus as his rival.

As we look at the text more closely, I want to give you three headings that I believe will help us hang some of these truths upon. We are going to see three things from John's testimony: 1. we're going to see his provocation to jealousy; 2. his response of humility; and finally his testimony of Christ's supremacy. We will only be able to look at the first two here this morning. Once we grasp these truths, I think you will understand better what it means to experience the joy of being occupied with Christ.

The stage is set here for these great truths beginning in verse 22. “After these things,” referring to after the cleansing of the temple, after his encounter with Nicodemus, “After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea.” So now they had left Jerusalem and they were now in the rural areas of Judea. It would be like leaving Nashville and coming up here to Cheatham County, that would be the idea. “And there He was spending time with them and baptizing.” So here we have Jesus with his disciples, a number of people following him. This was a time of personal discipleship; it was a time of

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evangelism and it was even a time of baptizing even though we know, according to 4:2, that it wasn't Jesus that did the actual baptizing, his disciples did that.

Verse 23, "John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized." Now, while scholars are uncertain where this actually is, it is quite clear that it is somewhere in the region of Samaria north of Judea where Jesus was ministering. So it would be like Jesus is in this area and John the Baptist and his group are up in Clarksville and Hopkinsville. Maybe you can get the imagery there. And it was a region with much water which strongly implies that the mode of baptism is to be by immersion which is also the meaning of the Greek verb baptizo. But I might add that this was not Christian baptism as we would know it today, that was not instituted until after the death and resurrection of Christ which baptism so beautifully pictures. Instead, this is what is sometimes called kingdom baptism; it was rooted in Old Testament purification rituals where Gentile proselytes were brought into Judaism. So it was a ceremony that represented cleansing and even genuine repentance and in anticipation of the Messiah's arrival.

In verse 24, you have a verse that's a bit of an editorial note but it's an important one as all words in Scripture are. There we read, "for John had not yet been thrown into prison." Well, this seems obvious to us but the reason why John wrote this is because by the time John wrote his gospel, the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke had been in circulation for many years between about 20-30 years earlier and John now is writing his gospel as an old man. He would have been somewhere up in his 80s and he would have written it around AD 80 or 90. So, he wanted to make sure that the people understood that because the synoptic gospels begin their account of Jesus' ministry after John is already in prison, he didn't want to confuse them and so John, the evangelist, is making the readers aware of what might be perceived to be some discrepancy by informing them that the incident that he's writing about occurred between Jesus' temptation and John's imprisonment, a period of time that is not described in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Now, with that editorial note out of the way, the plot begins to thicken. Notice verse 25, "there arose therefore a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification." The term "discussion" in the original language could be translated "debate" or it could even be translated "a dispute; an argument." John's disciples and a Jew about purification and this Jew would probably be representative of a number of other Jewish people and this would certainly be in keeping with the Jewish preoccupation of fastidious law keeping, especially as it pertained to purification ceremonies. Even to this day, they are big on that. So there is this dispute breaking out and evidently some Jewish person disputed the validity of what John was doing with his baptism and his disciples took offense. So, the feathers are ruffled here as we would say in Tennessee; a fight is brewing.

By the way, it's interesting that we see nothing in the text that John the Baptist paid any attention to it which, by the way, is the thing we need to do when these silly things break out even in the church. You will recall that Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:4, "pay no attention to myths and endless genealogies which give rise to mere speculation rather than

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furthering the administration of God which is by faith.” When these types of little squabbles come up even within our church, you will probably notice that I very lovingly disregard them and kind of move on with the things that are far more important.

This scenario, my friends, has Satan’s fingerprints all over it. Think about it: the Son of God has come from heaven to earth to save sinners from the just wrath that they deserve and this guy comes along, representing I’m sure others and wants to quibble about ceremonial purification? Are you kidding me? What does that have to do with anything? You know, this is a curse that plagues every church. You will see this from time to time. It’s happened in our church and I’m sure it will happen again. You will have some faithful few exhausting themselves to deal with the weighty issues of one anothering and evangelism and you’ll have others coming around complaining about non-essentials or some legalistic personal preference or trying to implement the latest Christian fad, things that only divide and distract and discourage and while there’s never any justification for this kind of behavior, it’s always going to happen. In fact, this is a part of God’s plan for every church. Do you realize that? We know that this is a divine necessity that will happen wherever there are believers. Paul warned that divisive factious people will always be a part of the church. 1 Corinthians 11:19, he says, “For there must be factions among you in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you.” In other words, like a diamond displayed on black velvet, the darkness of prideful, petty bickering provides the necessary contrast to display the magnificent diamond of Christian love and forgiveness and forbearance and leadership and wisdom of faithful servants who refuse to give the unapproved a platform whereby they can parade their spiritual plumage and so forth.

Well, we see this contrast in what happens next to John the Baptist. Notice there is a perfect storm that is brewing here. John’s disciples, think about it now, John’s disciples are debating with this guy over a ridiculous issue pertaining to Jewish purification versus John’s baptism and so they are getting distracted from what’s important. Their eyes are no longer really looking at Christ and all of his glory and everything that is really amazing that’s happening. Instead, they’re on the defensive and rather than lovingly confronting this guy and then ignoring him and moving on to what is really important, they are embroiled in it. It had to be frustrating to John.

Then notice what happens next. This is like stage 1 of what I believe the enemy is doing, verse 26, “And they came to John and said to him, Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have borne witness, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.” Oh my goodness, what a catastrophe. Here is number one in my little outline for you: John’s provocation to jealousy. My friends, Satan is absolutely ingenious in his abilities to bring discouragement and envy into a church, into a group of believers. Jealousy always produces strife. Think about it: John’s disciples have already fallen for a distraction over purification issues, a topic that is eternally inconsequential but one that probably causes them to compare the relative merits of John’s baptism to that of Jesus so they are questioning things now. In their state of defensiveness, they are upset – get this now – they are upset because the Son of God, whom John came to announce, is drawing a bigger

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crowd than their guy. There are more people going to Clarksville than they are to Joelton. Oh, what are we going to do? This is a catastrophe.

Beloved, this is one of Satan's greatest devices to distract us, to call into question the merit of your ministry because it's not as popular as someone else's. Notice how they say "all are coming to him." The hyperbole betrays their bias and their frustration. You know, in large part this is what fueled the seeker sensitive, rock-n-roll church movement where church leaders are obsessed with style and methodology to somehow attract a crowd rather than being obsessed with the holiness of God and the truth of his word with evangelism and genuine discipleship, teaching others to observe all that Christ has commanded. They get off on all of these other things; they are more concerned with entertainment and gimmicks than the glory of God and the transforming power of sound doctrine.

So the assumption here is that "all are coming to him and therefore, John you've got to do something about this. We can't have this. Jesus is drawing a bigger crowd than you are." I mean, when we think about it, it's laughable, isn't it? But this is what's going on. Now, it doesn't say this but if it was in our day, I would imagine John the Baptist's disciples would have said, "You know, maybe you need to shorten your sermons. Maybe you need to tell a few more jokes. Make them feel better about themselves. You know, why don't we add some drama and some interpretive dance. Maybe some comedy routines. Any kind of entertainment. We've got to draw them to us. Let's determine what their felt needs are, what people think they really need to hear and then let's give this to them because, John, if we don't do something and do something fast, everybody is going to go to Jesus rather than to you." Sadly, this is what you do if you seek the honor of men over the glory of God.

John understood this and he didn't succumb to the envy of his followers, he didn't lose focus on what he had been called and gifted to do. Notice, 2. his response of humility in verse 27-28. "John answered and said, A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, I am not the Christ, but, I have been sent ahead of Him." So unlike his envious disciples, John was not at all threatened with Jesus' popularity and success. He relaxed in the limits of God's sovereign plan for his life with the gifts that he had been given and he says, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven."

So he happily acknowledges his unworthiness, his inability to do anything for God apart from divine grace and divine enablement. I might add, this speaks to more than just our placement in ministry. It also speaks to the issue of understanding and applying Bible doctrine. I find it absolutely amazing how so many people are unable to see what is so obvious in Scripture with respect to certain Bible doctrines and you can list them. You probably know some of the ones that are the most obvious and what I find is that when I sit down with them and I open up the word of God and I say, "Well, let's examine the word here. Here it is here and here and here and here and here." But you find that reason, exposition, even common sense doesn't even come into play. They absolutely cannot see it and then there are others who will fall for the most ridiculous heresies and fads which, by the way, I've noticed over the years that there's 2-3 new fads that kind of hit the Christian

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scene about every ten years and they rise and then they begin to fall. Everything from the unbiblical egalitarianism that we see in the house church movement that resents pastoral authority to the popular prosperity gospel. From the King James elitists to the heresies of dominion theology and patriarchy and that whole movement that has spawned the extreme ends of the family integrated church. All of us are dangerously prone to these various things and certainly that will happen if we're not focused on Christ and we're focused on ourselves.

But we must never boast when we see these types of things, when we see blindness, we see people getting suckered into things. We must realize that were it not for the grace of God, there go I. It's the Spirit that has been given to guide men into truth and we must remember, by the way, that the Spirit of God does this in differing ways with different people and at different times. We must be patient though we must not be silent. Of course, there is no excuse for ignorance. We are commanded to study, to be approved workmen. We are commanded to search for wisdom but ultimately it is the Spirit that guides us into all truth and none of us have arrived. In fact, addressing the rampant pride and arrogance in the Corinthian church, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, "For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive?"

So this is John the Baptist's point here in verse 27. Of course, John the Baptist also, very willingly, embraced his subordinate role to the Messiah, the Son of God. He said, "I am not the Christ but I have been sent before him." In verse 29, he's going to declare that Israel is the one that belongs to Christ. Not to him, he is merely the friend of the bridegroom and he's going to affirm his will that his greatest joy is to see men turned to Christ, not to him. Something that his disciples missed. In verse 30, he will insist that while Christ must increase, he must decrease. In other words, he's saying to them in essence, "I am not bearing witness of myself but to Christ. I am occupied with Christ not myself. I want to see him exalted, not me. That's the joy of my heart. I care nothing for myself and whatever God gives me to do, that I will do faithfully if it's little or it's much."

What a stark contrast this is to the typical attitude of the world, those who seek the honor and the glory of men over God. John MacArthur, I though, put it well. He said, "The measure of success for any ministry is not how many people follow the minister but how many people follow Christ through the minister."

Beloved, for a moment, I want to address the cancer of envy because, at times, it even comes within our church. We will all struggle with this from time to time. Let me ask you: have you ever envied others who are more successful or more popular than you are in their Christian ministry? Perhaps within the church? Maybe outside the church? Maybe you've been frustrated because somebody who is not as gifted as you are is receiving more notice than you are or at least you think they're not as gifted as you are perhaps. You know how it works. You begin to have this feeling of being passed over. You begin to say things like, "You know, that's just not fair." Then, little by little, you feel like you've been mistreated and you talk to somebody about it and they begin to say, "Boy, that's a good point. I can't believe that's happened to you." Well, then the thing begins to grow and there is a root of

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bitterness that begins to set in and then if you look real close in the mirror, you will see that your skin is green with envy and you are jealous with the brother that you are to esteem more highly than yourself. Isn't that how it works? Of course it is.

And then your jealousy leads to strife, it leads to gossip, it leads to slander. We see that all through the Scripture. This happens from time to time in every church and then before you know it, there are factions that begin to develop. You begin to garner other people who kind of see things your way and now you've got a little group that's against another little group in the church. Why do you think there are over 1,000 Christian churches in Davidson County? This is really at the heart of it. Factions leads to church splits.

You know, at some level, this is even what happened to the followers of John the Baptist because after he was martyred we see that a number of them continued to promote his teachings after his death rather than joining in with the rest of the Christians. Later you will recall, the Pharisees became green with envy when the multitudes clamored after Jesus at his triumphal entry rather than clamoring after them. Beloved, this is a very important lesson for each of us to learn. Let me put it this way: jealousy, which biblically is a severe form of selfishness, jealousy betrays pride and pride will ultimately give birth to strife and to slander and to divisiveness and factions so guard yourself.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul had to address this among the worldly, fleshly Christians that he called "babes in Christ." Verse 3 he says, "you are still fleshly for since there is jealousy and strife." Jealousy, by the way, is an attitude, strife is the action. "For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly? Are you not walking like mere men for when one says, I am of Paul and another, I am of Apollos, are you not mere men?" Obviously you are.

So, beloved, test yourself. Let me give you a way of doing that. If you find yourself constantly at odds with other believers who are serving Christ faithfully as best they can even with their sin and their faults and failures, if you're constantly criticizing and complaining about other people in your family or church family, then your heart is being ruled by jealousy. You are not occupied with Christ, you are occupied with yourself and you must repent of this wickedness before it destroys you. In Psalm 101:5, we read, "Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy. The one who has a haughty look and a pride heart, him I will not endure." So we need to learn well from John the Baptist.

May I give you another example that came to my mind? That is: God's servant, Moses, you might recall that in Numbers 11, we learn of two men in the camp, Eldad and Medad, upon whom the Spirit of God rested and they were praising God and preaching within the camp without prior training and being zealous for his master, Moses. Joshua, his assistant, ran to Moses and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." He went on to say, "My lord, Moses, stop them. We can't have this. These people are praising God in the camp. They don't have permission to do that. You're the guy, not them." I love Moses' response in verse 29, "But Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake?" In other words, "Are

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you kidding me?” He said, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets that the Lord would put his Spirit on them.” It’s little wonder that the Holy Spirit would describe the Lord’s servant, Moses, in Numbers 12:3 by saying, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.”

So, friends, examine your heart. If you have succumbed to jealousy, you will be resentful of other people in your church family, you will be chronically angry, sullen and sour. You will be the instigator of strife and gossip and even slander. You will be discontent with what God is doing in your life with your position in terms of your service even within the church. You will be chronically complaining about how you are not used the way you think you need to be used. And for some, you’ll even begin looking for another church where you can be appreciated and respected the way you deserve to be and you will probably find that for a little while and then you’ll be right back into the same situation because you’re occupied with self and not with Christ.

Folks, may I remind you? Christ is the head of this mystical organism called the body of Christ, the church. And it is fascinating as we look into Scripture, we see that each one of us have been gifted in various ways to be useful and yet we’re all different in terms of how we are used within the body. We have varying gifts; we have varying responsibilities and these things ebb and flow in terms of where God places us and uses us. In fact, Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 12:18, he says, “God has placed the members each one of them in the body just as he desired.” So, friends, you need to rejoice in that. Wherever you’re being used, however you’re being used and learn from John the Baptist and say with him, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.”

Beloved, let me put it very, very clearly to you: we are not entitled to anything. Whatever our ministry whether it is large or small, whether it is private or public, it is a gracious gift from God and we need to rejoice in that. Our hearts need to be overflowing with gratitude, not with envy and discontent. We need to, first of all, be so overwhelmed that Christ would die for us and give us all of these promises that nothing else should really make much difference in life. But then beyond that, to think that he would gift us and use us in any way, that is inconceivable. That needs to be our attitude. This was John’s attitude. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4 that all genuine ministry is Christ-centered, not man-centered. Each of us, regardless of office, are merely earthen vessels, he calls us. Lowly, expendable, common, unattractive clay pots. That’s what we are. That’s what I am. That’s what you are. Why? 2 Corinthians 4:7, “So that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves.”

Now I want you to notice the depth of John’s self-effacing humility through his use of the imagery of a Jewish wedding in verse 29. He says, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made full.” Bear in mind, he’s telling these disciples who are all bent out of shape, who are all envious and jealous that another group is getting more attention and another leader is getting more attention than their guy and their group, he’s telling them that he is just the friend of the bridegroom.

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What is this saying? As we look into the Old Testament, we see that it often depicts the faithful remnant of Israel as the bride of the Lord and here John sees himself, if you will, as a groomsman. Maybe like the best man in a wedding. He's not the groom so there is no rivalry here for the bride. In fact, there is historical evidence to indicate that in the ancient days a friend of the bridegroom was never allowed to marry the bride even if the groom decided he didn't want to marry her. She was off limits, there was never any circumstances that he was allowed to have her.

So, the faithful remnant of Israel is the one that must turn to the groom, not to the groomsman. That's what John is saying here. So as John watched the bride, as he watched people going to the bridegroom that he loved and that he served, he didn't feel any envy, he rejoiced and rightfully so. Think about it: as time goes on we know that John's ministry popularity continued to wane and yet we know that he remained faithful, he remained bold even in his shrinking group of people, even in the face of Herod and his immoral family. He confronted them with the truth of the gospel, with the wickedness of their sin which landed him in prison and eventually led him to his execution. So much for popularity and success, right?

As you think about that, how could he have endured all of this? I mean, is that fair after all John the Baptist did? You know, folks, fairness is determined by a holy and a just God and the reason why John could endure all of this is because he was occupied with Christ, not himself. He relaxed in his sovereign care. He lived for the glory of God, not for himself. He had no concern for the praise of men. He was obsessed with receiving praise from God.

I want you to notice more closely, in verse 29, the friend of the bridegroom, it says, "stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full." Standing denotes a complete cessation of activity, right? A deliberate position whereby we focus our attention upon something. In this case, it was for the purpose of focusing on hearing the voice of Christ in which John greatly rejoiced. I find it interesting that in the original language, both verbs are in the perfect tense which expresses continuous action. So this denotes that the standing and the hearing was John's habit. It was his habit to deliberately cease all activities, to take time away from all of the distractions of life, to take control of his flesh. You know what our flesh is like. It's like a little baby: we flit here and there and we reach out and grab at anything that sparkles but he would arrest all that was in him. Why? To hear the voice of Christ. That's where he found his joy. No wonder he could say, "So this joy of mine has been made full." You might think of it this way: unlike Martha, we need to be like Mary and sit at the feet of Jesus. This was the secret to John's humility; this was the secret to his joy.

Beloved, humility and joy are fruits of the Spirit, fruits of the Spirit that grow on a vine that we have cultivated by standing and by hearing the voice of Christ. The more we behold him, the more we hear him, the more we become like him and the more we experience that exhilarating joy of his presence in our life. And as we experience those things, we don't have time to be jealous about this person and envious of that person and upset because this guy is more popular or this person over here has done something that offends me. We don't

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The Joy of Being Occupied with Christ, Part 1

By David Harrell

Bible Text: John 3:22-36

Preached on: Sunday, January 5, 2014

have time for that. We're so caught up with what Christ has done, what he's doing, what he's going to do and seeing other people come and worship him, that all of those things really don't make any difference.

But, friends, we cannot be occupied with Christ unless we stand still long enough to behold his glory, to hear his voice. 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says, "But we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory." In other words, as New Covenant believers, the glory of Christ is no longer veiled. It is revealed in Scripture and even as a mirror provides an unobstructed and intimate view of our face, Scripture provides that unobstructed intimate view of the Lord Jesus Christ. And as we continually stand still and focus on him, we become more like him and we experience the inexpressible joy of his presence in our life and that's what guards us from jealousy. That's what guards us from distractions. Herein, beloved, is the joy of being occupied with Christ.

For this reason, John's greatest joy was in seeing the bride of Christ embrace the bridegroom and for this reason he says in verse 30, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Dear Christian, can you say the same thing? Or are you subtly, in ways that you probably don't even want to admit, trying to increase yourself? My friend, you may serve Christ faithfully for years and I've known this to happen, maybe even in very visible ways that garner you much applause from men and then some day find yourself in a dungeon all by yourself. Now what? If your joy is found in your relationship with Christ, your joy will not be diminished because of your circumstances. In fact, your joy will only be increased because he will be all the more real and all the more powerful as he ministers to your needs.

John the Baptist understood this. Peter understood this. You will recall that the Lord told Peter that at the end of your life, you're going to be crucified and for 40 years he knew this and yet we can read how he encouraged saints that were experiencing increased persecution. He encouraged them by describing the security of their salvation and so many other things and he declared in 1 Peter 1:6, "In this you greatly rejoice even though now for a little while if necessary you have been distressed by various trials." Then he went on to remind them of their blessed Savior. Again, here is a man that is occupied with Christ. This is where he finds his joy, his strength. He went on to say in verse 8, "Though you have not seen him, you love him and though you do not see him now but believe in him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls."

Beloved, this is how John the Baptist guarded his heart from discouragement, from jealousy. He was occupied with Christ and not with himself. It's very simple. Therein he found his greatest joy.

The next time we get together, we will learn of his testimony of Christ's supremacy but I want to challenge you in closing here this morning, examine your heart. Are there areas of jealousy and envy that are robbing you of God's blessing in your life? The way that you

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can determine this is just look around, are there people that you resent? Are there people that kind of come to your mind and you think, "I just don't like that gal. I don't like that guy." And every time you have an opportunity, you like to belittle them a little bit, you like to demean them. And then, if you're honest, you're probably the instigator of strife. If that's you, won't you confess that? Won't you repent of that? Beloved, won't you seek reconciliation? That's what it means to be occupied with Christ, not with yourself.

Then I would ask you to decisively commit yourself, maybe even this afternoon, maybe even right now, to decisively commit yourself to a new course of action, to say, "Lord, I want, by the power of your Spirit, to become occupied with Christ not with myself and so I am going to begin to do what we even see with John the Baptist. I'm going to learn what it means to stand and hear. Every day from now on, I'm going to cease the activities of my life and have a time where I can really focus in the mirror, so to speak, focus on the word of God and I want to hear from Christ." Do you know a great way to do that? Have you got a red letter addition of the Bible? Those red letters are what Christ said. Why don't you read those this week. Meditate on those truths. Read the rest of the word of God.

I find it interesting that here you have an 80 year old apostle, the one Jesus loved, recording this, recording the words of John the Baptist, words that he had heard many, many years earlier. This is how important this is because, friends, the more you behold Christ, the more you gaze upon his glorious person, the more you become consumed with his attributes and all that he has done, is doing and will do, the more you will become like him, the more you will become occupied with him and the less you will be occupied with yourself. And the fruit of that is not only guarding your heart against the things that we are so prone to like jealousy and selfishness, bickering, but the great blessing of this is that you will experience joy that is made full as John the Baptist reminds us. Come what may, joy that is made full. Amen. Aren't those wonderful truths.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these words that just cut to the very core of each one of us. Lord, we are all guilty. We all feel the sting of the lash upon our backs. So, Lord, I pray that by the power of your Spirit today will be a new day where we grab a hold of these great truths, where we confess, we repent, maybe we even be reconciled to a brother or sister in Christ. But, Lord, help us to become more occupied with you and therefore less occupied with ourselves. For those that know nothing of who you are as Savior, O God, consume them with such legitimate guilt, overwhelm them with the reality of the condemnation that abides upon them that, Lord, today would be the day that they repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved and experience the miracle of the new birth. We ask this in the precious name of Jesus our Savior and for his sake. Amen.

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